

What's Your PMQ (Public Meeting Quotient)?

by Elaine Cogan

Have you ever held a public meeting when just a few people showed up... and you were glad? If you are on the planning commission long enough, you are sure to have a range of public involvement experiences: carefully planned and publicized meetings when very few people come, and those you thought would not be of public interest where there was standing room only.

Designing and carrying out effective public meetings is an inexact, but important component of the planning process and should be taken seriously. Here are some guidelines that can help it work.

One technique does not fit all circumstances. Before planning your public involvement process, answer one simple but vital question: what is the purpose? If you want simply to inform people about a project, a "show and tell" meeting where information is presented may be all you need. While you must always allow time for questions, the focus of the meeting is on giving information to the audience.

Do you want to inform and also receive public comments? In that case, a meeting that begins with a presentation but is followed with breakout or small workshop-type discussions can be productive. Always avoid the unlimited question and answer free-for-all where only the most bold or opinionated will have their say.

Seek out natural constituencies. Never worry that developers or landowners will be shy about voicing their opinions about planning policies or programs. Planning affects them directly and they make it their business to follow what you are doing. But there may be other less vocal constituencies in your community equally as deserving of attention. For example, nonprofit social service agencies may be very interested in zoning matters that affect affordable housing. What's more, they probably have legitimate concerns. School advocates and members of

adult and youth sports leagues are likely to be interested in park or open space policies.

Before you make significant decisions, broaden the range of people you inform and involve on issues to obtain a true picture of the range of interests affected by planning decisions.

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Do not hide behind the legal requirements. Too many planning departments stick only to the letter of the law when they notify people of proposed actions. Moreover, most notices are written in such legalese and jargon that lay people either cannot understand them or just throw them away. You may have to continue giving the required official notice to the required people, but you can accompany it by a plainly written explanation. Furthermore, you should broaden your notice list to include affected neighborhoods and interest groups. Do not use only English if you want to reach a non-English speaking population.

Get out to where the people are. Do not hold all your public meetings in City Hall or at a place or time only at your convenience. Especially for subjects that involve specific neighborhoods, hold the meeting where likely attendees are more comfortable, such as schools, libraries, or community centers. Make sure there is handicapped access and sufficient parking and access to transit.

If at all possible, have your meetings covered by local access cable TV. This is an effective way to reach people unable to attend and also to show your receptivity

to the public. Be sure your cable channel shows the name and phone number of someone to call for more information or to comment on the issues you have discussed.

Listen actively... and respond appropriately. At each meeting, take notes about what people say. When appropriate, you can also distribute a short questionnaire so that those attending have an additional way to express their opinions. Mail a summary of the meeting to all attendees who have filled out a registration sheet, publicize the results in the media or community newsletters, and respond personally and promptly to anyone who has a particular request.

Make friends with the media, but do not expect the media to be your friends. Have you ever been misquoted in the newspaper or found your remarks seemingly out of context in a television interview? As a public figure, you can expect to be sought after by the media. You want to be friendly and open. But always remember that the media are businesses, and as such, report news in the way they believe will best attract and hold their customers. That may conflict with your perception of the specific situation.

Will all your public meetings run smoothly, without controversy? Probably not, but if you do it well, you can take satisfaction knowing you went more than halfway to meet the needs of the people in your community. You may even enjoy the true give-and-take of a well designed and executed public meeting. ♦

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