

New Ways to Reach New (and Old) Audiences

by Elaine Cogan

We all know the drill. We hold a public hearing on a controversial planning issue and the expected proponents and opponents with strongly held and often emotional opinions show up. At the end of an exhausting session, planning board members may be comforted that they have conformed to all the legal requirements, but, on reflection, may ask themselves: Have we received sufficient and accurate information from the public? Have we heard from a cross section of the community? Do we really know what most people think about this issue?

Of course, planning policy should be based on more than “just what the public wants.” You have to consider the law, political realities, and your own sensibilities and consciences. Still, community outreach is important. Though it is more an art than a science, you are remiss if you rely only on public hearings, or any other single method, to gauge public opinion. Let’s explore a few others.

Advisory committees and task forces. The planning department is undertaking the arduous task of updating the comprehensive plan. The more you get into it, the more obvious it becomes that there are many factors to consider if you are to craft a living document that will meet the needs of your community today and in the future. To help you in this task, consider appointing one or more citizen advisory committees or task forces, each with a specific charge and deadline. It is not always important that the committees be balanced. For example, a group of developers and another representing neighborhood interests can be asked to explore their issues in depth and present them at a commission meeting. Listen to them respectfully, after making sure they understand they are

advisory, not policy-making.

Cable access. Many communities are served by local cable companies whose primary job is to relay clear signals from the mega-producers. Some do perform a modicum of local programming, such as televising city council or planning commission meetings. Cable companies often will be receptive to an offer to broadcast a panel discussion about a provocative or

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vital local planning issue. Some stations even have a call-in capability so that listeners can telephone questions or comments. Such programs usually do not have a large audience, but with the proper notice beforehand, you will be surprised by how many people watch.

Surveys and focus groups. These scientific methods of testing public opinion can be expensive, but they are the best ways to test a sample of the population. If you use them, understand their limitations. They are snapshots of opinions and perceptions at a particular time, and the public mind can change rapidly. *Editor’s Note: for more on the use of surveys, see “Citizen Surveys: Taking Your Community’s Pulse,” in PCJ #35, Summer 1999.*

Open house. Projects with high visual qualities, such as a park master plan, lend themselves to an open house format. Choose a school cafeteria, church

basement, or other easily accessible location, and put up displays showing possible options and opportunities. Invite the public to visit and talk with staff and consultants about the project. It is best to hold an open house over a period of time, 4 to 8 p.m., for example, so that people can come and go on their own schedules. You may want to provide a simple written questionnaire to give you more information about their concerns.

Newspapers. As a general rule of thumb, the smaller the community, the more likely that planning issues will get front page or prominent coverage. But an editorial or a story – favorable or not – is only one-way communication. Try to convince the editor to run a short questionnaire that people can clip out and return; certainly, always read the “letters to the editor” column for another way to test the public pulse.

Web page. With the click of a mouse, many people are logging on to city or county Web pages for a host of information. At the least, make sure that up-to-date notices about your meetings are posted. Investigate including information that explains, in clear, layperson’s language, upcoming decisions you are considering. A short online questionnaire will give you the opinions of a segment of the population not likely to attend a public meeting, but include it only if you have the capability to collate the answers. A telephone number people can call for more information is another welcome touch.

The above highlights only a few ways to reach the public in addition to the ubiquitous hearing. Some of them require more staff capability and time than others, but they all will give you additional glimpses into what the people of your community think or want. ♦



Online Comments:

"For our Recreation and Open Space Plan update, we hosted an 'Open Space Fair' at the senior center. It was an all-day event with periodic presentations of the plan via a 'PowerPoint' slideshow ... In an adjacent room we had 'stations' corresponding to the major topics of the plan, with visual displays. We tried to man the stations in an effort to engage viewers in a dialogue. We also had survey forms available for people to fill out while at the fair, and handouts to take away about the plan and plan process.

I found the most effective part of the fair was the one-on-one commentary at the stations. People were more comfortable in speaking their mind to staffers rather than in a typical hearing format, and we/they could ask questions and make comments to make sure both parties really understood what the other was saying. (We also had really great food – the benchmark of a good meeting!)"

– Judith Otto, Director, Community Development and Planning Department, Peabody, Massachusetts

"We're in the process of conducting a review and amendment to the City's comprehensive policy plan. We're currently in the public input phase, which has been framed by a series of meetings covering 'regions' of the City in order to effectively address the specific concerns of region residents, and also the concerns of established neighborhood associations. We've found that this process has worked well, in that we challenge the residents to provide comments and address issues outside of the localized concerns of their block or neighborhood

The next portion of public input is in the form of special interest group meetings, which involve focused meetings with specific types of groups (historic preservation, economic development/business, environmental, schools, owners' groups) to get at the issues that most concern them, while at the same time getting them to address the larger concerns as invoked in the existing policy plan."

– Heath Eddy, Senior Environmental Planner, City of Bloomington, Indiana

"Have a register so that you can note those attending public events, providing them a place to indicate if they wish to be contacted or not as the issue develops. Ask for email addresses, and use them if provided. At the same time, request and respect any privacy preferences, making public, if you need to at all, only the names of those who have no objection to the fact of their attendance. ... Also, be sure to give credit and thanks to all individuals and organizations that participated, even if you do not fashion a program that all participants favor. Acknowledge ideas that were provided, even if they were not embraced. That way the public will come back again, knowing you heard what they said even if it was not reflected in this particular policy recommendation."

– Lindsley Williams, Washington, D.C.

"In order to get the most relevant, clear input every meeting should be a crafted affair. We have found it helpful to use standard questionnaire sheets and encourage that they be dropped at the open house or public meeting door (once the questionnaires leave the area they are unlikely to be submitted.)

While it's nice to ask for open ended comments, make sure to ask closed questions that can be summarized in order to provide politicians with a broader view. For example; "Are you very satisfied, satisfied, neutral, unsatisfied, very unsatisfied with the policies related to whatever." Using such statistically relevant questions I can then point out to my Board the larger perspective. For example, at a public hearing I can state that the previous open house had 167 people provide questionnaires, and of that number 73% were neutral or were satisfied with the particular policies. This can help offset the impact of vocal individuals who have a high profile but do not necessarily reflect the standard opinion. It is important to craft your public process such that the resulting information can be used by politicians to provide a more balanced, well informed decision."

– Ilene Watson, Planner, Regional District of Central Okanagan, Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada



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