

Consider the Needs of Generation Xers in Your Public Involvement Strategies

by Elaine Cogan

There are many ways to draw citizens to public meetings and workshops. Although finding the right approach to specific planning issues is always a challenge, the basic tenet for success applies regardless of whether we want to reach seniors, baby boomers, or Generation Xers. People will respond to an issue if they know about it and if they care about it.

It is helpful to the planning process if commission members represent a variety of community interests, and having people of various ages on the board is important. Still, the need for meaningful civic engagement in a democracy by a broad spectrum of the population is at least the same as ever, or perhaps more vital today when so many people seem turned off by government and tuned into their own affairs.

Generation Xers and their counterparts have many more ways to obtain and respond to information than their parents and grandparents. Acknowledging this reality, there are several keys to reaching and involving them in public events concerned with planning issues that may be different than trying to involve other populations.

• *Ask yourselves and planning staff: what do people in their 20s and 30s need to know in order to participate, not what do you need to tell them?* That is not as simple as it may seem. It involves putting yourselves in their shoes and realizing that this generation, possibly more than most, responds to public matters in a very personal way: what's in it for me or my family or possibly my neighborhood? The more narrowly you frame the issues to respond to these concerns, the more likely you are to get helpful responses.

• *Be willing to segment the "big picture."* For example, if you are seeking input for a grand master plan for a park,

contact those with special interests, such as bikers, hikers, preschool parents, and other users, and ask them to be involved in planning for the parts of the park that most interest them. You are sure to hear some creative and new ideas you can put into the master plan.

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• *Go where the people are.* Instead of holding one public meeting or workshop at a central location, take the show on the road and request time on the agenda of meetings of school parents, sports leagues, and other organizations in which Generation Xers are active. You probably will have to abbreviate your presentation but that allows you to hone in quickly on their concerns. Always allow time for questions and provide feedback questionnaires for comments.

Another or ancillary approach is to organize informal chats in coffee shops or other gathering places. Place posters announcing that you will be there at a certain time to discuss a certain issue and be prepared to talk with anyone who shows up.

• *Make it easy to attend.* Choose the time and place for all general public meetings that suit the majority of attendees, with special attention to the needs

of those in their 20s and 30s. That means you may have to consider Saturday mornings or late afternoons. If needed, make child care available, free if at all possible. For liability purposes, always hire licensed specialists, not the neighbor's teenagers.

• *Publicize widely.* Generation Xers rely more than most on information transmitted via cyberspace. Design and update web sites that hold their attention, and be sure to advertise their availability. Invite their participation with simple questionnaires or surveys.

Some planning agencies are supplementing their web sites with blogs as another way to solicit interest and finding them very popular. Others use email and listserves to circulate information while at the same time developing data bases of interested parties. In all cases, avoid clogging up sites or email with information that is too technical and not sufficiently relevant to your intended audience.

• *Never give up.* Informing and involving the many publics, including our next generation of leaders, is an art, not a science. Learn from your failures and celebrate and replicate your successes. ♦

Elaine Cogan, partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan LLC, has worked for more than thirty years with communities undertaking strategic planning and visioning processes.



Since 1991, Ms. Cogan's "The Effective Planning Commissioner" column in the *Planning Commissioners Journal* has helped citizen planners across the country find ways of serving their communities most effectively. She is the author of the popular, *Now that You're on Board: How to Survive ... and Thrive ... as a Planning Commissioner*.