

Chapter 7:

Building Support for Conservation: Public Participation



“Planning without citizen participation is neither democratic nor wise . . . [t]heir practical wisdom and support make plans capable of implementation, their knowledge of local conditions fills gaps in the planners’ data and information, and their varied interests diminish the tendency of planning to embody a single purpose.”

Henry Jackson, U.S. Senator, 1952–1983

Most local officials recognize the logic and wisdom captured by Senator Jackson. The challenge for most leaders is not deciding whether to involve citizens but how to involve them both productively and successfully. For local officials who want to meet the needs of their constituents, engaging citizens in a potentially controversial decision-making process presents real and significant challenges. This chapter highlights successful techniques that have been used by local leaders to engage and involve citizens in the complicated efforts to integrate natural area and wildlife conservation into local planning and zoning decisions.

When a community sits down to implement the goals and vision of a community plan created with robust citizen input, it is more easily implemented by the local legislature (e.g., town board) and local administrative bodies (e.g., planning boards). If a planning process does not adequately involve concerned and affected citizens, they will, at best, publicly question and, at worst, vociferously oppose any implementation measures that change the status quo.

How Can Public Participation Be Used to Protect Natural Areas and Wildlife?

Understanding the diversity of the Hudson Valley landscape and the tools needed to integrate nature in the land-use planning process is only part of this handbook. A community that participates in the decision-making process is more likely to be supportive of decisions to conserve natural areas. Public input on plans and regulations is particularly important when the proposed action will change the way land can be developed. Such

shifts will only be sustained with continued support from the community and affected property owners. Without it, more time and energy will be spent building support during the implementation stage. A municipality can use planning as an opportunity to involve a broad range of citizens to build community consensus about conserving nature.

What Is the Difference Between Consensus and Compromise?

“Compromise involves splitting the difference between positions defined by individual self-interest and often results in an outcome that satisfies no one. By contrast, consensus results in a shared vision of a desirable future state, and derives from a coevolution of individual preferences within a spirit of community responsibility. As people participating in the process gain more knowledge about . . . natural functions, as well as the needs and values of other participants, individual preferences coevolve, which in turn, moves everyone closer to shared goals. This process takes more time, but is more likely to yield an outcome with legitimacy and staying power.”

(Postel and Richter 2003)

Smart Growth Strategies

Once a decision to involve the public has been made, the conveners must be clear about how and why the public is being involved so that the process is productive and efficient. Many of us are painfully aware of how hostile and unproductive some public processes can become. By focusing on the approaches listed below, municipalities are more likely to lead productive meetings.

Create a Purpose for Each Meeting

Are you trying to inform the public or are you trying to receive information from them? The answer to this question will help inform the type of meeting you will hold. Not all meetings require public participation. It is important to assess the degree to which the public

considers the issue significant. The public will become involved according to its perception of the seriousness of the issue. If you are going to make a decision that will require action by another government agency, subject to public hearings, chances are you will want to involve the public.

Invite the General Public, Not Just the “Usual Suspects”

Reaching nontraditional or hard-to-reach groups is a challenge. However, it is important to seek out and facilitate the involvement of potentially affected individuals and groups. A single advertisement in one local newspaper will not attract all the potentially affected people. Reaching out to specific groups by personally inviting them and perhaps holding meetings for segments of the public, like large landowners, can go a long way.

Strategies

Once you identify potentially affected or interested individuals or groups, you need to develop strategies to:

- reach them;
- inform them;
- demonstrate to them the benefits of being involved;
- build relationships with them.

How Is the Public Participating?

If the action taken by the municipality is responding to a well-defined problem and an obvious solution exists, the need for public participation is limited. If however, the problem is not well-defined and the solution is not obvious, the need for constituent involvement is heightened (Hustedde et al.). Be clear about how you want the public to participate. The spectrum below will help you decide how to label the process.

Public Participation Spectrum

Inform ↔ **Consult** ↔ **Collaborate**

Inform—Decision-makers Provide Information on Decision-making Rationale.

- Public participation goal: To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives, and/or solutions.
- Promise to the public: We will keep you informed.
- Examples: Open house, web sites, fact sheets, posters or displays in public spaces.

Consult—Opinions and Feedback Solicited from the Public

- Public participation goal: To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions.
- Promise to the public: We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns, and provide

feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

- Example: Public meetings.

Collaborate—Public Is Involved in Decision-making Process but Is Not the Decision-maker

- Public participation goal: To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.
- Promise to the public: We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.
- Examples: Planning exercises, consensus-building, participatory decision-making.

Create an Agenda

Having an agenda provides the public with guidance as to what will be discussed at your meeting. Start by identifying the meeting's purpose and goals and then identify your target audience. Be clear about the specific objectives of the meeting (e.g., providing information, gathering input, encouraging dialogue). Set times for start and finish and stick to them. Make sure that the agenda identifies where in the meeting the public will be able to speak.

Sample Agenda

- Introductions
- Problem statement and purpose
- Process details and meetings
- Issue identification
- Option generation and evaluation
- Areas of agreement
- Next steps

Greet People at the Door and Distribute Nametags

Greeting meeting participants at the door sets the tone that their participation is desired and valued. The initial greeting creates the basis for relationships through informal conversations. The use of name tags removes barriers to interaction among the participants and encourages name recognition.

Set Ground Rules

Take some time at the beginning to create ground rules for the deliberations. The group should see these rules as their own and should be encouraged to accept them and enforce them during the meetings. Depending on the size and scope of the meetings, ground rules can be simple.

Sample Ground Rules

- Everyone participates: Be sure everyone gets an opportunity to be heard.
- Be courteous: Respect other points of view and wait for others to finish speaking.
- Speak for yourself.

Food and Drink

This is more important than you think! People think better when they aren't hungry. A simple plate of cheese or fruit helps make the environment more welcoming and encourages the formation of relationships in an informal environment. Community meetings are a great opportunity to feature local food.

When and Where to Meet

Identify an appropriate venue for the meeting, one that facilitates the achievement of your objectives. The location chosen for the meeting must address several important needs, including sufficient capacity, accessibility, and the "nature" of the location: Will this site be perceived as neutral territory? If not, the participants may feel guarded and defensive. Make sure that all your stakeholders will be able to participate in your meeting. Be careful that you are not excluding potential stakeholders by having your meeting at an inconvenient time. The meeting should be held at a time that is convenient to as many people as possible. If the time of the meeting presents conflicts for a group of key stakeholders, hold two or even three meetings at different times, so that all can attend. In addition, sufficient time should be dedicated to complete the task at hand. If you try to pack too much into the meeting, participants will feel rushed and pressured and the effort is likely to be a waste of time.

Room Set-up

Think of the information that you are trying to receive from or convey to the public. Arrange seating so participants can see the faces of other participants and help facilitate dialogue. Use graphics, aerial photographs, and maps to organize discussion around specific suggestions. Some public workshops break participants into small groups to encourage dialog and allow for drawing and notes on local maps.

What to Say About Natural Areas?

When talking about natural areas, it is important to do so in a meaningful way to the participants. Speak in clear language, avoid jargon, and try to explain concepts when you can't avoid jargon. Make sure you discuss why high-quality habitats and other natural resources are important to the community at large. Respect people's feelings about property rights and the value of their land. Use the information in this handbook to help you.

Meeting Summary

A summary will help create an understanding about what was discussed, what was agreed to, and what is happening next. It should integrate the agenda, the ground rules, discussion items, and next steps in a way that communicates what occurred. In addition, the summary can be circulated to participants for comment and should be published for the community.

Summary of Benefits

Engaging the community early in planning and zoning processes leads to greater success in implementing the changes needed to protect the natural environment. Towns can share the information on local habitats with community residents. Further, community ideas can be gathered and considered in creating the plan or zoning update. This way, the public will better understand why the town has acted to change development patterns. The best way for the public to understand the rationale for a new land-use approach is to include them in the planning process suggesting the change. Doing otherwise is "neither democratic nor wise."

Local Example

Town of Clifton Park Open Space Plan

The Town of Clifton Park (Saratoga County) used a consensus-building process in developing their first open space plan. It took three years, but the town created a plan that had broad community support. The open space committee was made up of diverse stakeholders including farmers, builders, recreation groups, and conservation groups. In addition to conducting a natural-resources inventory and an economic analysis, the committee invested a great deal of time in public input and outreach. They used focus groups to get input and build trust, mailed surveys to get input from across the town, held planning charrettes to identify open space areas, held workshops to introduce the draft plan, and public hearings to get comments on the final plan. To get the word out broadly, committee members provided outreach at town events, gave presentations to civic groups, and held local media conferences. Because the committee emphasized public participation during planning, there was little controversy following the 2003 adoption of the plan by the town board. By 2005, the town had acquired 300 acres, and planned to purchase another 250 acres of critical habitat. Clifton Park has been a model for success and attracted federal, state, county, and local funds to implement its priorities.

Resources

- Arthur, J., C. Carlson, and L. Moore. 1999. *A Practical Guide to Consensus*. To order, contact The Policy Consensus Institute. 1003 East Interstate Ave., Suite 7; Bismarck, ND 58501-0500; 701 224-0588.
- Creighton, J. L. 1992. *Involving Citizens in Community Decision-making: A Guidebook*. Program for Community Problem Solving. Washington, D.C.
- Depoe, S. P., J. W. Delicath, and M.-F. Aepli Elsenbeer. 2004. *Communication and Public Participation in Environmental Decision-Making*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Porter, D. R., and D. A. Salvesen. [eds.] 1995. *Collaborative Planning for Wetlands and Wildlife*. Island Press. Washington, D.C.
- Wondolleck, J. M., and S. L. Yaffee. 2000. *Making Collaboration Work: Lessons from Innovation in Natural Resource Management*. Island Press, Washington, D.C.

Author Summary

This chapter was written by Sean Nolon, former director of the Pace Land Use Law Center. The center, founded in 1993, works with law students and local leaders to foster the development of sustainable communities and regions through the promotion of innovative land-use strategies. Mr. Nolon is currently an assistant professor of law and director of the Alternative Dispute Resolution Program at the Vermont Law School in South Royalton, Vermont.