

How Deliberative Forums Differ from Traditional Public Meetings

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT REPORT

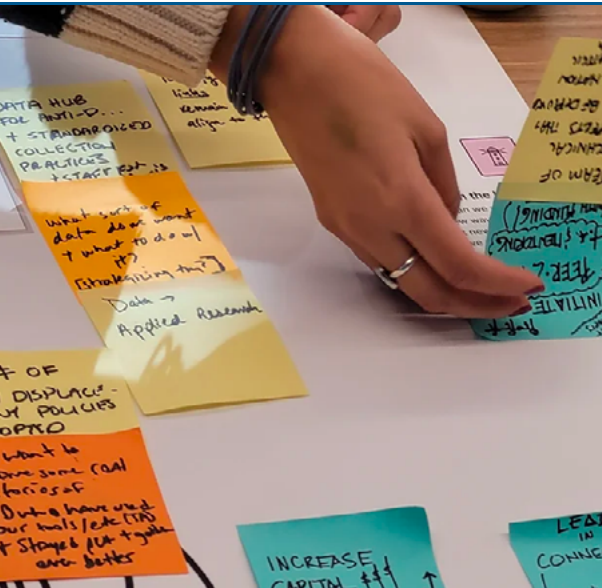
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**Linking to Decision
Making**



Most communities hold public meetings throughout the year, but very few of them are well organized or structured to be effective or achieve meaningful results.

Often, public officials invite public comment on policies or plans but without framing well what are the issues in play, what kind of information needs to be provided to bring citizens up to speed, or, what kind of input would be useful.

To make things more challenging, the meetings are rarely well publicized, minimal efforts are deployed to bring in a good cross-section of the community, and thus, turnout is largely residents who are either most opposed to or most supportive of what's being proposed. Virtual and hybrid meetings, while more accessible to some communities, can still present a challenge when designing content and recruiting participants.

When Public Engagement Associates works with public officials we always bring a very different approach to organizing public meetings, one where the turnout is more representative of the local community by age, gender, race, and income level, and one where participants learn about the issues throughout the meeting, and deliberate together to find common ground and shared priorities.

Deliberative forums require a different type of commitment from public officials. First, there must be a genuine desire to move away from the tradition and custom of a public hearing, which is built around the idea of each citizen receiving 2 or 3 minutes at a microphone to express their view or opinion. Second, public officials must look for effective ways to help residents understand important background on the issues in play and key particulars about what are the range of options to consider. Finally, they must commit to a more transparent way of collecting ideas and allowing residents to exchange ideas and views with one another.

To plan for more deliberative forums, public officials need to invest more resources into recruiting a representative group of citizens, more time and attention on developing materials that can be easily understood, and sufficient time and inventiveness in determining the right outcomes you want to achieve and the right means to achieve those in how the meeting is designed.

The table below summarizes the key distinctions between traditional public meetings and the more deliberative approach we take in organizing and facilitating public forums.

Areas for Comparison	"Traditional" Public Meeting	Deliberative Forums
Type of Format	Speaker-focused	Participant-focused
Used Mode of Discussion	Open-minded discussion	Focused discussion questions
Role of Information	"Experts" deliver information. Participants share anecdotal evidence	Participants use detailed, balanced background materials. Citizens respond to and share information
Who Attends	Often engages "usual suspects", i.e., stakeholders and citizens already active on specific issues.	Reaches into diverse populations, including citizens not usually active, with efforts to reach under-represented
How Citizens Ideas Get Surfaced	Airing individual ideas and concerns	Facilitator-led small group discussion. Identifying shared ideas/concerns and assigning them relative priority
How Citizens Ideas Get Used	Limited reporting of participant input	Instant, detailed reporting of participant input

Linking to Decision Making

Core to our belief in public engagement is that people should have the opportunity to influence the decisions that impact their lives. The fact is too many public meetings do not have any significant influence on the end result – a policy change or new plan. Good public engagement does not waste time asking citizens and other stakeholders to provide input that has no real potential to impact decision making or outcomes. In our initial meetings with planning clients, we insist on clarity about what they want citizens – and stakeholders – to potentially influence. Many clients are accustomed to sharing information with the public about what is to be done, or what might be done. Or they look to present something that they hope the public will accept or endorse without much back and forth. But they are far less used to allowing citizens to genuinely influence a decision or plan.

In our experience the most successful planning encourages and enables citizens to shape and refine plan or policy development up to final reviews and approval. A very different shortcoming we see in some public meetings is policy makers or planners asking very open-ended questions: “What are the most important issues?” “What do you want to see in the future?” There is a time and place for assessing all of the opportunities and challenges in a community. And there is a time and place for identifying what people envision for their future. However, done poorly, this leads to discussions about issues that are not that closely linked to the policy questions at hand, to the plan that needs to be developed, or to the resources that are realistically available. And when this is done poorly, it both raises expectations about what will get addressed and, ultimately, skepticism about participating in a public process when results don’t transpire.

We believe it is absolutely essential when organizing community engagement to link – whenever possible – the public’s guidance and recommendations directly to a policy’s or plan’s development. This requires putting something on the table that can genuinely be influenced by public input. It also requires clarity and transparency about what is fixed and cannot be influenced. The former can be difficult for those who are accustomed to not involving the public in a meaningful way to influence decisions. The latter can be difficult, especially for elected officials that want to appear responsive to anything the public says.



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We recommend that at the beginning of the project, and as it evolves over time, to continually ask yourself:

- What stage of the policy development or plan development process are we currently in? What are the decisions that need to be made now?
- What information do participants need to consider the options?
- And what input do I want from people to help inform that decision – or to narrow down options?
- A guide we have found useful was created by the International Association of Public Participation. Visit the IAP2 website to learn more <https://iap2usa.org/cvs>.



Public participation occurs across a spectrum, delineated into five categories by the International Association for Public Participation: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, and Empower.

Each category indicates the relationship that the participation “provider” has with the community, i.e., to inform them, to consult with them for feedback, to involve them in articulating aspirations and concerns, and so on.

None of this is to suggest that the decision-making authority is transferred to the participants (unless you are on the empower end of the spectrum, which is very rare). In planning and in most policy-making arenas, there are many other factors that need to be assessed. And in the end, it is the elected officials and policy makers that must make the final decisions, but they must do it with the best information they can acquire from meaningful public input just as they do with professional planning expertise from staff and consultants.

After input has been received, other factors considered, and decisions made, the transparency must continue with elected officials, planners, or policy-makers making clear what the final decisions are, why they made them, and how public input factored in. They need to show what they were able to include from the public input, and just as important, what they could not include and why.

Making this link between community engagement and decision making helps build higher levels of collaboration and shared responsibility between government, citizens, and other stakeholders. This is especially important when broad public support and multi-sector support is required for successful plan or policy implementation.

Ensuring Inclusive Representation in Who Attends Public Meetings

Proclamations are often made about the importance of diverse voices being a part of public processes. Then there is the counter retort that “We advertise public meetings, but nobody comes!” Often planners and policy-makers don’t know how to recruit diverse groups of people to public meetings, and certainly not in ways that are fully representative of the community.

So, why is inclusive representation important? First, it is the right thing to do. If a plan or policy is being developed that will impact a community, the full range of perspectives from that community should be heard. Second, engaging all perspectives can increase the chances of successful implementation, because the plan will have broader community support and more credibility with elected officials. The community will feel greater ownership of the plan and take greater responsibility for implementation. Finally, it makes for better decisions and plans. The challenges facing planning and policy-making are complex and cross-sector. Good strategies require input from as many diverse perspectives as possible.

Gaining representation across stakeholder groups, when doing public engagement, is reasonably straightforward. Most planning efforts we have witnessed have some structure such as a task force or committee to engage people with expertise and a stake in different areas, including environment, housing, and business, among many others. Representatives from these areas engage in discussion with planners or policy-makers and with each other to protect their concerns. They read draft materials and provide input. This effort usually goes well, though conflicting interests can be hard to manage. Gaining a good representation of participants from across the general citizenry is generally more challenging. How do you get a large and representative group of citizens engaged? How do you get the full range of the community in one room together? What is the representation – which often, but not always, includes racial and economic diversity – that we should be aiming for? In what ways should we plan to engage residents and how will that differ with the way we engage other stakeholder groups?

Residents vs. stakeholders. When we talk about engaging residents (or citizens) we are talking about members of the general public that do not represent any particular interest except perhaps their own. When we talk about stakeholders, we are talking



about individuals or organizations that are representing a specific interest or set of interests: preserving biodiversity, supporting business growth, advocating for lower-income housing, etc. Of course, the boundary between the two is not always clear. Almost all of the people representing stakeholder groups are residents, and many of the residents have certain issues that are more important to them than others. However, the distinction has been helpful to us, and we believe that planning and policy-making efforts need to increase the level of engagement with residents while maintaining good engagement with stakeholder groups.

Many planners will shy away from speaking directly about engaging a diverse or representative group of people across race/ethnicity, gender identity and income levels. They tend to use less specific references and say “we want to engage those that have been under-represented or not involved in previous planning efforts.” It is okay to use this language sometimes, but public officials need to be explicit and intentional in their internal planning for public meetings to achieve the representation and diversity they are aiming for.

What kind of representation should public officials seek to get in public meetings? We believe the best answer is that participants should match as best as possible the demographics of the community according to age, race/ethnicity, income, and gender. We have not seen a meeting or project that scored perfectly on all these, but we have seen many that get close, and that is a big improvement over most efforts.



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**Strategic
Meeting Design
and Facilitation**

What does this mean at a practical level?

It means you need to set clear targets for your engagement efforts. Usually you can use recent U.S. Census figures. It means developing strategies for engaging each different demographic, especially the “hard to reach”. It also means tracking how well you are doing in achieving your targets.

People often ask us what we suggest for engaging the hard to reach. To use a tired but true cliché, the most important factor is not what you know, but who you know. When you engage minority groups, youth or low-income communities, you have to work with people they trust. This usually leads to developing important relationships with churches, community based organizations, and other “grass-top” leaders. When a minister in a church suggests on Sunday morning that the community should get engaged, it goes a lot further than a PSA, poster or flyer.

In our work, and in our recommendations to others, we engage these local organizations and leaders very early in our planning efforts. We bring them on board in ways that allow them to give some input to the way we do public engagement. We position the project so that it is worth their time and effort to be involved and ask the members in their community to be involved. In many cases, where we want a community organization to do a lot of outreach, we will offer stipends to cover some of their time. Another helpful tactic is to hire local community organizers. These are usually individuals who already have good connections with the community. They can help gain access to local organizations and spend time working the community, attending meetings, making calls and knocking on doors to talk with people and get them engaged.

All of this probably sounds labor intensive. It can be, but a little bit can go a long way. One way we have found to reduce costs on some of our larger projects is to recruit and train “semi-volunteers”. These people, we sometimes call them Ambassadors, receive a small monthly stipend and training from us to reach out and engage their community. These people usually have other jobs, but want to be more involved in their communities, have free time in the evenings and weekends, and appreciate the small amount of money and training they receive.

The same approach can be successful for virtual and hybrid meetings. Not only do in-person invitations help to spread the word about a community event, online communications such as social media, emails, listservs as well as online community engagement tools provide multiple ways of collecting public input.



Aside from this outreach, the other important facts for engaging the hard to reach are more about logistics. When you can, meet people where they are, in their communities. Go to the churches and community meeting places they already know. For big meetings, provide support services, from language translation to childcare and transportation assistance. Community based groups can also help with “turn-out logistics” such as providing car and van pools to your events.

Achieving effective community representation at public meetings helps build legitimacy for the community engagement on your plan, project, or initiative in the eyes of not only elected officials but also community leaders and the public.



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Strategic Meeting Design and Facilitation

We like to say that 50% of great facilitation is having the right meeting design in place. Yes, you still need someone with strong facilitation skills to run the meeting, make sure you hear every voice, and accomplish the meeting's outcomes. However, even a great meeting facilitator will struggle if the design of the meeting doesn't fit well with the meeting purpose, audience, and outcomes or the history and context of the issues being addressed.

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Meeting design is much more art than science, and one improves their art the more often they design. Design consists of two core parts: content (the materials you provide) and program design (how the meeting is structured and organized). Neither can happen effectively without the other, as the tasks for each are highly interdependent. Getting clear on the purpose of a meeting – or a series of meetings – is the key initial task.

What do you need to focus on (i.e., what set of policy issues or plans) – and what do you need to achieve (i.e., what input will best assist in making progress on those issues or plans)?

A good example of this: a new Councilmember in D.C. wanted to allow residents of his Ward to weigh in on the key issues around public safety, education, housing, economic development, transportation, and health care for a full day “summit” of 200 residents. As a result, we needed to determine what “content” we needed to provide (i.e., concise written materials that summarized each policy area; presentations that highlighted those summaries) and what meeting “design” allowed residents to effectively discuss and prioritize both their Councilman’s ideas as well as their own.




The Content for a Public Meeting

When engaging the public, it is essential, first, to ensure you provide useful and timely information, without making it too dense or detailed or too laden with jargon and “insider” terminology. Thus, there are important questions to consider when preparing the “content” for a public meeting:

- What is the “frame” for the information? How will it be organized and towards what
- outcome? This includes how it will directly or indirectly influence the making of a policy or plan.
- What is the minimal amount of information that participants need to understand this frame and the relevant issues?
- What are the best methods for conveying this information that are accessible and engaging?

Ultimately, it’s important to focus on providing just the right amount of information as well as the best methods to convey the necessary background information and the most relevant data. We have found this is best done by focusing on being clear, straightforward, and engaging in the materials you provide: This includes dynamic presentations, charts, maps and other materials that provide just enough context so that people have some shared understanding of the situation and focus very quickly on the most important issues and questions. This information should be presented in a clear and simple – and, ideally, engaging – manner to be accessible to as many people as possible.



Our general rule of thumb on most policy issues is to have no more than a 2-page handout for each discussion topic, with ample pictures, graphs, charts, and pull-out quotes. Frequently, preparing a short video (or a dynamic PowerPoint or Prezi presentation) can help to organize, animate and guide the public through a learning process and raise their level of effective participation – in the meeting itself. While you are streamlining what information is critical to be presented and how, you will simultaneously need to determine how the meeting will be designed and structured as well as how to align that design with the materials and presentations. Questions you will need to address during design include:

How long will the meeting be?

- Where does this particular meeting fit into a longer planning or policy-making process? How many presentations and discussions will you have?
- What specific questions do you need answers to – both qualitative and quantitative questions?
- Who should present for each segment of the program?

There are many places meeting design can go wrong. An opening that does not make it clear what the meeting is about can confuse people. A long and detailed presentation can drain everybody's energy. Poorly worded discussion questions or instructions can send people working in different directions. Allowing one or two people to dominate the conversation can frustrate everybody else. Over the years, we have found the following design principles to be most helpful:

- 1. Balance Presentation & Engagement:** Balance the right amount of information presentation with table discussion and other types of interaction. Too little presentation and citizens have insufficient guidance to hold a good conversation; too much presentation and citizens are potentially either overwhelmed and don't know where to start or they are left with too little time to engage in good conversation.
- 2. Right Discussion Questions:** Pay close attention to discussion questions. We almost always conduct a focus or simulation group prior to a public meeting so we can test the questions we plan to pose. Sometimes we realize we're way off; sometimes we realize we just need a few tweaks. A good discussion question leads to quality discussions and helps yield the input, ideas, or perspectives you hope for. A poor discussion question can lead to group frustration either because it is too open-ended, too limiting, or too confusing and/or ambiguous.

3. Right Tools: Find the right tools for each meeting (and whether they are even necessary) and the right timing for each tool. For example, like many planners, we use polling keypads frequently at our meetings. Just like a great deal of forethought is invested in the right discussion questions, the same goes for polling questions. Polling questions can be used to ascertain who is attending (and how that compares to local demographics), what are people's priorities (either of what you provide or what they self-generate), how they evaluate various options being considered, and so on. Providing the context is critical, as is the actual framing of the question, and the options or scales you choose. We never treat the use of keypads casually, nor do we any tool we use. Invest the right time upfront to figure out what purpose it will serve, what outcome you seek, and process will best yield the desired result.

4. Invest Real Time in Design: In our experience, insufficient attention is paid to putting together the right agenda for a meeting. Most members of the public prefer a well-structured meeting with clear objectives and clear guidance on how to participate.

Developing the right sequence of activities requires an iterative design process. We will go through several draft meeting designs before settling on the right one.

The Effective Facilitation of a Public Meeting

Select someone who has strong facilitation and moderation skills to lead the meeting. Good facilitators can both create the right tone and environment as well as 'hold the space' so that citizens know what is expected from the meeting and from them. They are welcoming, clear, intentional, and open. They give people a sense of purpose for their work and a sense of appreciation for what they share, both the positive and the negative. Some agencies have skilled facilitators internally; some don't. You might not always be able to find or provide a quality, neutral facilitator for your meetings, but especially when the stakes are high, use of an outside skilled facilitator can be the difference between a successful and a disappointing meeting.

One final note on facilitation, we have found that often planners are better served during a public meeting if they can quietly and carefully listen to what others have to say and respond to feedback (praise and critique) from the position as the expert planner and not as a facilitator of the meeting. Letting someone else facilitate for you can liberate you to play the other critical roles you need to play to move a planning process forward.



[Public Engagement Associates \(PEA\)](#) designs and facilitates processes that help elected officials, public policymakers, communities, and advocates find common ground on local issues that matter. We partner with clients to gather the community perspectives to help make important, strategic decisions.

