

## **Chapter 5**

# **CITIZEN PARTICIPATION**

Often the hardest part of a visioning or community planning process is getting people motivated enough to care about community issues and then to actively participate in addressing them. Short of a major crisis or obvious problem in their own backyard, it seems that the majority of people just don't want to get involved or aren't interested enough to care. C.C.E. educators, community leaders and others can be a great asset in building active excitement about a community planning or visioning process by making sure that the right people are "at the table" early in the process and that those individuals are committed to actively participating and carrying out a successful process.

## **Topics**

- Types of Participation
- Techniques for Collaborative Community Planning
- Questionnaires and Opinion Surveys
- Charettes
- Your Town* – Community Design Workshop
- Visual Preference Survey
- Focus Groups / Affinity Groups
- Exchanges
- Design Competitions
- Leadership Development
- Recommendations for Participation
- Putting Collaboration to Work
- Conclusion

## **Types of Participation**

There are several different types or methods that community leaders or planning facilitators can use in getting community members actively involved in the planning process. Each has some advantages and some drawbacks, and some might be more appropriate or effective in a given situation than others. But the ultimate goal of each technique or strategy is to get community members actively involved in planning their own communities' future. Below are listed and explained some common community organizing techniques used to facilitate active participation.

### **Public Hearing**

Public hearings can often prove problematic. People sit around (if the meeting is even well-attended) looking smug while other people yell or grand-stand. No real information is presented, and no real dialogue occurs. Sometimes new or useful information is provided, but rarely. There is some potential entertainment value, with people sometimes dressed as animals, etc. Unfortunately, this difficult (at best) method is most often the one required by law.

### **Roundtable**

A communal gathering with a facilitator or leader where every participant gets to express their ideas or opinions in turn. Presents a greater opportunity for dialogue, but can also be dominated by a few willful or crafty individuals.

### **Roundtable Alternative**

You get some presenters at a table in front of a room who present the issues or problems at hand, followed by a question-and-answer session between the presenters and meeting participants followed by a general discussion. Typical way of organizing a meeting but can feel certain groups or people feeling excluded and might intimidate some from participating.

### **Open House**

Presenters discuss ideas or concepts and then meeting participants have a chance to examine and critique the presented information or viewpoints.

### **Small Group Discussion**

Presenters begin by discussing main ideas or concerns. Then citizens can move to various stations around the room to examine presented information, make statements or ask questions. A facilitator is present at each station to answer questions and record responses or concerns. Plenary session can follow with reports from each table.

### **Focus Groups**

Small group discussions with selected people having an interest in the subject. Usually results in less grand-standing, and more focused, but also provides a more limited outreach and is less inclusive of members of the general community.

### **Survey**

Methodology is everything. Bad surveys give misleading results. Good ones can be useful but expensive, time-consuming and energy-intensive. Can yield good information if properly done (good survey instrument, carefully designed sample, intelligent interpretation, etc.). Largely accurate only for a brief moment in time.

### **Client Committee**

Someone appoints a set of people with some interest in a question or problem to a committee. They provide input throughout all or part of the planning process. Advantages are that the committee can provide structure to the community participation effort and give access to a variety of viewpoints that can improve the study outcome. It can limit participation, which can be a good or bad thing depending on point of view. It can also build support and legitimacy for study or policy recommendations. Disadvantages are that it is often time-consuming, and sometimes more time or money is spent in the care and feeding of the committee than on studying the subject at hand. It can be an imperfect tool for soliciting in-depth input from widely disparate constituencies.

## **Workshop / Charette**

A bunch of people get together in a more or less organized way to work intensively on a problem for a short period of time, usually not more than a day or two. The City of Ithaca N.Y. held a traffic-calming charette in which a set of recommendations for traffic-calming in various city neighborhoods was developed. But significant preparation work must be done beforehand to ensure widespread participation at a workshop or charette and a larger effort can be structured by having several smaller community meetings that carry out planning work in different sub-areas, leading up to a big neighborhood summit where a broad spectrum of community residents are brought out to actually write a plan.

## **Techniques for Collaborative Community Planning**

A crucial and essential element of any planning effort is public outreach and the building of community consensus on matters important community issues or problems. Such outreach and planning efforts demand a collaborative process. A broad range of interests have to be engaged and provided the opportunity to actively participate in the process – interests that go beyond government officials or public planning agencies to include and welcome real and active participation from non-governmental leaders such as builders, business owners, community and regional activists, citizens, schoolchildren, seniors, and others.

### **THE EARLIER MORE PEOPLE GET INVOLVED, THE BETTER.**

When creating strategic or comprehensive plans, individual communities are also encouraged to look past their borders, to collaborate with neighboring communities or other neighborhoods to promote mutual regional interests. Known as “*intermunicipal cooperation*,” in New York State this process is encouraged by statute. In addition to any general or specific powers a municipality has to prepare a plan and enact or administer land-use regulations, any municipality may enter into agreements with any other municipality or group of municipalities to undertake any or all such powers, functions or duties (see *NYS Town Law 284*, *NYS Village Law 7-741*, or *NYS General City Law 20-g*).

Below is a (far from comprehensive) listing and summary of some of the techniques currently being used throughout various New York State communities working towards creating *effective, collaborative, and participatory community planning*.

- Questionnaires and Opinion Surveys
- Walk-around-the-Block
- Interactive Workshops
- Interactive Websites
- Charettes
- *Your Town* Workshops
- Visual Preference Surveys
- Focus Groups / Affinity Groups
- Community Exchanges
- Design Competitions

## **Questionnaires and Opinion Surveys**

An important first step any community can take in preparing a plan or community vision is gauging public opinion. Often this first step is done distributing a survey, disseminated by mail or conducted via telephone or personal interview. Surveys and their resultant information can be extremely valuable, so long as several variables are carefully determined: defining the right survey method, identifying the population to be surveyed, determining if the survey should be for an entire population or a representative sample, designing questions and a format that meets your purposes and eases analysis, and having the resources for outreach, follow-up and analysis. Local colleges or other educational institutions can often be helpful in this regard.

Surveys can also be misused not executed properly. A common approach is the mailed survey – a multi-page questionnaire sent to everyone on the property tax rolls, voter registration lists, or other available lists. Response rates of around 20% are common, with more than 50% being very rare. While the information from such surveys can help guide planning efforts, they are often anecdotal and can be best used to complement additional collaborative efforts.

## **“Walk-around-the-Block”**

There is often nothing better to get people brainstorming ideas about their community than a walk through it, followed by discussion. First advocated by noted urban historian and planner Kevin Lynch, the “walk around the block” method can be used to help focus on specific neighborhood or site issues. Invite property-owners, residents, developers, children or anyone else with a knowledge of or interest in the area to take a tour of the neighborhood – individually or as a group. Listen to and record their ideas on the assets, liabilities and needs of a neighborhood or community.

## **Interactive Workshops**

Beyond mandatory public hearings, interactive workshops can be offered where the public is invited to actively participate in drafting plans or ideas. Such sessions are commonly offered in series, and focus on a sequence of specific subjects or geographic areas that exhibit unique but pressing issues. Such sessions are often run by trained facilitators. They can help insure that participants stay focused, active and informed. Attendance can also be heightened by adding a quality “expert” speaker to help spark conversation and, of course, by offering refreshments.

One of many examples of such activity is the work of Karl Kehde. In his guide “*Smart Land Development*,” Kehde outlines one approach to interactive workshops in which stakeholders can use maps, aerial photographs or even model buildings to collaborate on defining the best uses for neighborhood or community property.

## **Interactive Websites**

Interactive websites can help complement other efforts such as workshops or meetings and can stimulate and ease the communication of ideas and contributions from those with access to and comfortable with using computers who are perhaps less comfortable with participating in public meetings or workshops.

## **Charettes**

A term (literally “cart” in French) borrowed from architects and design professionals and applied to community planning, charrettes are intensive, interactive community workshops designed to finish a project or plan. The concept is to invite a full and active range of community interests to participate in a compact series of sessions – yielding a plan in a short time period with solid public support. Typically run by a team of professionals over a weekend or series of evening or day sessions, often with support from volunteers from the community, a charrette approach can build tremendous energy and overcome the drawn-out schedule of meetings often a part of some planning. Charrettes often incorporate other techniques noted here including “expert” presentations, walks around the block, and visual preference surveys.

## **Your Town – Community Design Workshop**

One type of “charrette” is worth note. The Landscape Architecture program at the State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, supported by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Endowment for the Arts has completed more than a dozen *Your Town* workshops. Here landscape architecture faculty and students oversee an intense schedule of onsite workshops to help either a group of leaders from various communities or a interest from a single community to construct a vision about its future using various design and planning techniques. The outcome is focused on creating a framework for solving identified community problems. Case studies and hypothetical exercises are used to share ideas and creative thinking about how to solve problems at home. Broader application of this technique will be announced soon, with a possible use for “coastal” communities in New York State.

## **Visual Preference Survey**

Building on the notion that *a picture is worth a thousand words*, VPS is a technique pioneered and trademarked by Anton Nelessen Associates where a series of visual images are used to stimulate and anchor a community visioning process. Using results of a questionnaire and onsite field work, a design professional or planner selects and catalogues a series of representative photographs. These are then presented in a workshop setting where participants rate each on a scale of positive or negative. After analysis, the most- and least-favorable images along with maps, aerial photos or photo simulations are used in follow-up workshops to focus discussion on planning goals as well as tangible translation to maps, design recommendations, and desirable land use code amendments. Elements of a visual preference survey – particularly the use of photographic images to stimulate discussion – are now used by most planning professionals when working on comprehensive plan or master plan projects.

## **Focus Groups / Affinity Groups**

Two other types of interactive workshops can be used to bring smaller, ideally representative groups of people and community members together to consider and work on emerging elements of a plan under the guidance of a facilitator.

*Focus groups* are designed to bring together a representative group of residents and stakeholders to concentrate and focus on one or more topics. Indeed, the “special committees” regularly formed to lead the preparation of a plan can be considered part of this category.

*Affinity groups* are used to strategically bring together those with similar interests to discuss special topics. For example, farmers can be invited to attend a special discussion on the future needs of their agri-businesses. Downtown business owners might together consider the needs of their commercial neighborhood. School classes can be used to consider youth service needs. Many planning processes give particular attention to those individuals or organizations that hold or control larger parcels of land – understanding that that affinity group’s needs and interests can drive key land-use trends.

### **Community Exchanges**

A new and exciting approach to engaging public involvement is termed “community exchanges.” Here representatives of one or more communities travel as teams to visit other communities hoping to learn from the similar experiences of those places. Built on the success of “sister city” programs and on the realization that we often accept what visitors observe about our hometowns more readily than views of local residents or experts, a number of such exchange programs have been initiated to help community leaders and other decision-makers share relevant experiences with other interested communities.

Notable as an example of such programs is the work of the Glynwood Center and the Countryside Exchange. That organization has sponsored numerous community exchanges throughout Europe and North America, including several exchanges by New York communities. Exchanges hosted in the Adirondacks, Catskills, lower Hudson Valley, and Long Island have demonstrated the great value of teamwork in learning about the efforts of other communities with shared problems, visions and goals.

Another variation on this is the First Impressions Program offered to communities through the Community and Rural Development Institute.

### **Design Competitions**

Some communities sponsor design competitions to seek various ideas from local schools or colleges and professional designers about physical plans for their community or a specific local area or neighborhood. Through such competitions, students and professionals can stimulate ideas for the community to compare or use as foundations for development plans. Awards can be offered to celebrate the contributions, but often the most important result of such competitions are the ideas generated rather than specific designs proposed. Such competitions can also be time-consuming and expensive to conduct, and in most cases the winning proposal or design does not actually get built or implemented.

The success of any of these approaches is based upon the commitment and willingness of community participants to work together towards finding a solution to common problems. It takes a willingness to set aside existing biases and to work collaboratively towards the ultimate goal of achieving the community’s vision. Again, not each technique can or should be used in every situation, but a combination or selection of several of these strategies will usually be required in soliciting and maintaining active community participation in the planning process.

## **Leadership Development**

One of the most important goals of a community planning or development process is the building of leadership capacity among formerly unengaged sectors of the community that, even after the current process has been completed or carried out, can be brought to bear in future community initiatives. To this end, it is important for the leaders or facilitators of the current planning process to identify and reach out to all elements and sectors of a community. These can be grouped into two general groups, as defined below.

### **Established Leaders**

Some kinds of people are virtually always involved in community development. These are the “usual suspects,” those with traditional positions of power or authority within a community:

- Government officials.
- Business leaders and the private sector.
- Already established community or group leaders.
- Realtors and developers.
- Newspaper editors, publishers and other media.
- Industry and trade-group representatives.
- Political officials and party representatives.
- Service group and not-for-profit leaders.

Many of these people are experienced in dealing with economic development or industrial issues and can contribute plenty of ideas and strategies. Many have knowledge of and access to sources of capital. A few are “gatekeepers” – people who can open or close the “gate” to important people of financial resources. For example, the town manager is often the gatekeeper to the town council, while the person in charge of a regional development agency often keeps one of the gates to state-funded or provided resources.

### **Frequently Overlooked Leaders**

Many sectors of the community have, however, been historically kept on the fringes of decision and policy-making, or provided only token representation. Here is just a partial list (you’ll probably be able to think of others):

- Women and minorities, retirees, and young people.
- Teachers and educational professionals.
- Health and social-service professionals.
- Religious leaders.
- Newcomers and immigrants.
- Farmers, ranchers, loggers, and fishermen.
- Environmentalists.
- Neighborhood activists.
- Laborers.
- Artists and craftspeople.

It is important to reach-out and actively engage as many of these often-neglected segments as possible and engage them in the planning process, for these groups can provide a rich source of ideas, resources, time and energy with which to address community issues.

## **Recommendations for Participation**

“Participation” in itself is a laudable goal, but it is not useful if it is chaotic, unstructured or random. This section lists some general guidelines and principles that can be used when attempting to create a successful and productive community participation process.

- **Get women involved.**

This strategy has been one of the most important new developments in community process and maintaining successful working groups. Women have certain traits found less among males, including an open communication style and more general acceptance of and sensitivity to others’ opinions and ideas.

- **Structure group meetings closely.**

Many times that those in a group doing the most thinking and those doing the most talking are not the same. An experienced facilitator can help a group stay on target by limiting responses and adhering to the set agenda.

- **Set your own agenda.**

Instead of a head speaker in front of a room dictating what is going to happen, let the group decide. The participants should develop their own agenda of what issues to address instead of being given an already prepared list of topics. Use questions such as “*How do you feel about being here?*” or “*What do you want to see happen?*” to get groups started in preparing an agenda.

- **Don’t rush it.**

It’s crucial to get everyone in a meeting to be able to express their opinions when trying to fashion an effective and productive working group out of diverse community members.

- **Expect, but be able to manage, anger.**

But also realize that people may be substituting anger for other emotions, such as fear. We’re taught that while it’s not good to admit fear, it’s okay to blame others. Good facilitators will be able to get to the root of such emotions and allow opposing opinions to be expressed constructively.

- **Make it special.**

Use pretty stamps, colored envelopes or a hand-written invitation to group meetings. A personal letter is a rarity these days. It says, “we value you” and when people feel valued they are more likely to actively participate.

- **Invite the right people.**

There are movers and shakers in every community, and those concerned with any issue. You have just got to find them, invite them and get them involved.

- **Take responsibility.**

Effective working groups take time and effort. Having a catalyst is key – one person or organization that’s dedicated to getting things moving. Someone has got to push, prod, call, schedule meetings, mail invitations and then call again to remind others. You have to have the spirit and dynamic energy to make it happen.

## **Putting Collaboration to Work**

Collaboration is a challenging art. It often means talking seriously with people you don't know, agree with, or even like. It means dealing with people you may fear or those you think (or do) have power over you. To make your collaborative efforts more successful (not to mention more fun and less stressful), review the following principles. They're guaranteed to help.

- **Hear their concerns and ideas before telling them yours.** In important discussions, many of us tend to blurt out our own ideas. But you're far more likely to be heard if you first listen to the ideas of others. Once they've said their piece, their minds are clear to hear your ideas.
- **Understand their interests before describing yours.** Look for the interests, fears and values that underlie the things they're saying. Repeat what you think you've heard, then ask if your understanding is correct.
- **Describe your interests instead of defending your position.** Most of us have a good idea of how our interests can be fulfilled. That's our "position." If, instead, we talk about what we want – our problems, needs, and interests – before seeking solutions, the discussion may lead to alternative ways of fulfilling those interests.
- **Join them before asking them to join you.** Look for ways in which their interests are consistent with yours. Then work with them to focus on how you can both get what you want.
- **Set aside differences and disagreements to solve mutual problems.** If you're talking with people with whom you've disagreed in the past, don't ignore those differences. Instead, clear the air by acknowledging them. Agree to disagree respectfully on certain points, but keep in mind that what's most important is that you're both part of the same community and you're eager to collaborate on this particular effort, regardless of past differences.
- **Employ active listening.** Acknowledging, empathizing, and clarifying are the most valuable skills that can be brought to any important communication.
- **Pursue easier issues first.** Your collaborative effort may go smoothly, but if it's a highly-charged discussion and the issues are difficult, tackle the easiest ones first. That success can then instill the confidence and momentum to tackle the more difficult issues.

## **Conclusion**

The community development process can be seen as being overall about eliciting community participation. It seeks to empower residents and other members of a community in actively working towards solving their own problems and making their own visions a reality. This chapter has discussed some of the key goals, concepts, and strategies of creating a participatory community planning process. The next chapter will discuss the important role of the facilitator in making this process happen.