

## Section 7

# Public Participation

Richard Bernhardt, FAICP, sat in the back on a Wednesday night public meeting listening to the discussions about setbacks, alleys, driveways, and other issues before the planning board. In a couple more weeks, he'd be at the front of the room fielding the questions himself. But for now, he was getting the lay of the land before starting his job as the new planning director in Nashville, Tennessee. His reputation for successful public participation during his tenure in Orlando, Florida, depended on things like he was doing here—listening to his audiences and hearing their ideas first-hand.<sup>1</sup>



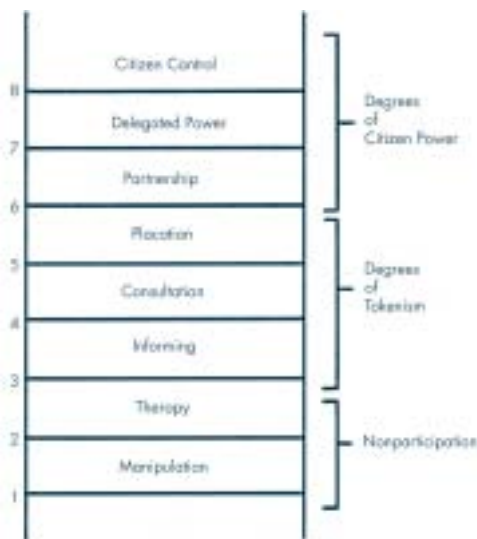
Nashville Metropolitan Planning Department

Citizens from Nashville, Tennessee, participating in a planning workshop.

## 7.1 Planning and participation

Public participation is essential to the planning process—whether it entails a planning commission meeting, zoning board hearing, or visioning exercise that is part of developing a comprehensive plan. As a planner, you should be creating an atmosphere in local government that encourages citizens to participate and express their concerns.

The late Sherry Arnstein, who was recognized as an AICP Planning Pioneer in 2005, developed a typology in 1969 that clarified the meaning of participatory government. Her eight-rung ladder of citizen participation remains a prescient explanatory work and a reference point for planners and other local government officials about what is and is not meaningful public



American Planning Association

Sherry Arnstein's famous public participation ladder. The higher rungs indicate more involved and meaningful public participation.

### 7.1.1

**Arnstein's typology of public participation still relevant today**

participation. She divided her ladder into three segments: non-participatory actions at the bottom (manipulation, therapy); tokenism in the middle (informing, consultation, placation); and citizen power at the top (partnership, delegated power, citizen control).<sup>2</sup>

**7.1.2**  
**Public participation**  
**pays off in Azusa,**  
**California**

Successful public participation often requires persistence. Obstacles and what initially may appear to be a failure can be the foundation for subsequent change, as occurred in Azusa, California:



City of Azusa

One of the public meetings held in Azusa, California, to prepare a mixed-use redevelopment plan for the city.

In 1999 voters defeated by referendum a low-density, all-residential housing proposal that had been approved by the Azusa City Council. Although the project owner and developer had spent \$3 million to promote the original proposal to residents, in 2002 city officials convinced the owners of the site to spend another \$500,000 to develop a second plan with significant citizen involvement.

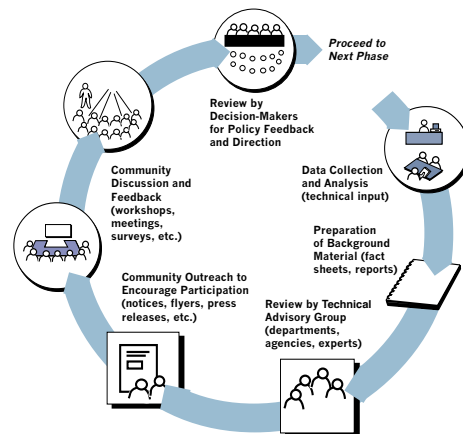
A series of workshops and forums was used to craft the new plan, which promoted walkability and included mixed uses, higher densities, design variations, and a new school. The driving force behind the effort was a core group of 200 citizens, whose discussions were organized and facilitated by planners.

As this second plan neared approval by the city council, a group called Citizens for Responsible Growth opposed the project because of its mixed uses and smaller lot sizes. To decide whether the new plan would be implemented, a second referendum was held. Planners and citizens who had worked together on the development's plan highlighted the strong participatory process used in its creation. This time voters approved the redevelopment proposal by a resounding 75 percent margin.<sup>3</sup>

**7.2 Feedback essential**

Meaningful public participation will include a continuous and multidirectional flow of information among the public, key stakeholders, technical professionals, and local decision makers.

**Possible Process for Review of Housing Goals, Strategies, Policies and Programs**



Association of Bay Area Governments

The feedback loop created for the Association of (San Francisco) Bay Area Government's housing plan, Blueprint 2001, by consultants Baird and Driskell Community Planning.

**7.2.1**  
**Meaningful**  
**participation**  
**includes continuous**  
**and multi-directional**  
**feedback**

The Association of [San Francisco] Bay Area Government’s Blueprint 2001 describes this as a “feedback loop.”

Ideally, community participation is an on-going process and the feedback loop is adjusted in both content and intensity to the size and scope of the project at hand. As the scale of the participatory effort increases, the intricacy of methods required for facilitating and organizing citizen input increases as well. Consider the citizen-led initiative to solicit ideas about the site of the former World Trade Center in New York City:

The 16-acre World Trade Center (WTC) site is hallowed ground, on a par with the Gettysburg battlefield and USS Arizona Memorial. Yet, the area of the former WTC is privately leased and eventually will become an active part of the city’s social and economic fabric. How should the public be involved in the site planning process? Who are the stakeholders? Questions such as these and the complexity of the situation clearly demand close attention to all interested parties’ perspectives.



Municipal Art Society

One of the memorial workshops held during the Imagine New York public visioning process.

The “Imagine New York” public visioning process, which received the APA American Vision Award in 2003, involved several thousand people and more than 250 workshops and charrettes at hundreds of locations throughout the metro area. It covered topics ranging from building materials to foreign policy. Eventually 19,000 ideas were entered into a database, accessible via the Imagine website, and refined into 49 vision statements that were published in a June 2002 summary report.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the ideas reinforced suggestions promoted by professionals, such as an insistence that replacement structures conform to local building codes from which the original towers had been exempted. Other ideas provided contrasting viewpoints, such as whether anything at all should be built on the site.

While the citizen recommendations from Imagine New York were not part of the official decision-making process used for the site, the visioning process was still worthwhile. As a result of Imagine New York, planners and citizens, along with other professionals, captured the ideas of thousands of citizens and organized them in a way that was heard by the media, elected officials, and decision makers.<sup>5</sup>

When a group of citizens takes the initiative on a planning issue it need not put the planning department on the defensive. Planners in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, found themselves in such a situation and, by working with an engaged group of citizens, devised a plan that provided residents with a great sense of ownership:

## 7.2.2

**“Imagine New York” collects and organizes citizen ideas concerning an effort of monumental significance**

## 7.2.3

**Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, planners demonstrate that we don’t need to go on the defensive when citizens take the lead**



Jefferson Parish Planning Department

A public workshop in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, for the planning effort, Envision Jefferson 2020.

Jefferson Parish residents knew something was missing in the growth occurring around them when a master plan for the area had not been implemented after 50 years. So in 1999 civic associations from all over the parish decided to seize the initiative and began an unprecedented cooperative campaign to move land-use planning forward. Witnessing their drive, planners stepped in to help them take control of their parish's future.

Planners effectively responded to the political will manifested in the citizens' proposal by initiating the Envision Jefferson 2020 project in 2000. Public involvement in creating the plan represents one of the higher levels in Arnstein's public participation hierarchy. It was initiated with 36 educational presentations, then moved on to eight planning workshops, surveying, issue identification exercises, planning open houses, and planning advisory boards. Incremental movement toward greater participation produced a plan that became law in August 2003.<sup>6</sup>

### 7.3 Target your audience(s)

When it comes to effective communications, marketing and political professionals recognize that the "general public" doesn't exist. That's why terms like "security moms" and "NASCAR dads" surfaced during the 2004 election season. As shopworn as such phrases have become, they illustrate the importance of identifying groups with shared values and engaging them on the basis of those values.

The importance of values when interacting with the public cannot be overstated. Only a small percentage of any public audience takes the time to form an opinion based on logical reasoning. Most audience groups take key pieces of the newly presented information and fit them within preexisting mindsets based on prior experiences. Citizen engagement can be improved by taking into consideration your target audiences' attitudes, opinions, and orientation toward an issue or situation.<sup>7</sup>

The effects of a project or sections of a plan must be divided into individual segments and the consequence of each segment explained in language meaningful to the targeted audience's shared values. Understanding how your audience will most likely receive and interpret the information it hears through pre-existing values and information schemas is one of the most important steps planners can take, especially when addressing controversial issues or situations.

Citizen engagement efforts often face skeptical audiences who remember past disappointments in local government, but skepticism can be addressed by a program of sustained outreach, as demonstrated in St. Paul, Minnesota (see example at 7.5.1), and by intelligence gathering.

#### 7.3.1

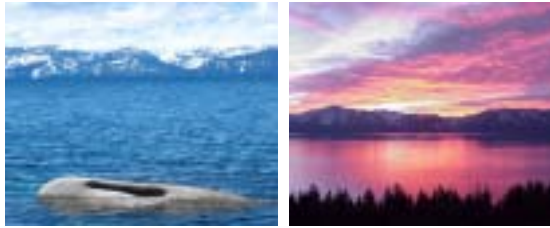
**Divide messages and position them according to audience interests**

#### 7.3.2

**Address skepticism with sustained outreach**

Effectively positioning or framing a discussion requires both information about the audience and a strategy for using that information in subsequent efforts. (For more about framing and communications based on audience values, see Section 2.) The Lake Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) in California and Nevada, in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection, did this as part of the Pathway 2007 visioning project:

Past efforts to solicit public input about Lake Tahoe water quality protection measures were fraught with paralyzing disagreements between full-time residents, vacation property owners, and visitors. This time planners used a three-pronged, collaborative strategy involving focus groups, visioning workshops, and statistically reliable surveys to engage everyone who “enjoys, reveres, or profits from Lake Tahoe.”<sup>8</sup>



Tahoe Regional Planning Agency

Maintaining Lake Tahoe’s current water quality is one of the common values of stakeholders, who were surveyed as part of Pathway 2007, a collaborative effort to update both the regional plan and national forest plan for the area.

### 7.3.3

**Lake Tahoe's Pathway 2007 solicits and organizes opinions of stakeholders located in several cities**

Two focus groups were held in the immediate area and six outside the region in order to include Lake Tahoe property owners and visitors living in suburban Sacramento, the Sierra Foothills, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and northern Nevada. From these meetings planners identified the issues that were most important to each stakeholder group as well as what each group saw as influencing factors and acceptable solutions. The information will be used to guide the ongoing work of technical advisory groups and citizen planning forums.<sup>9</sup>

## 7.4 Reaching out

In addition to audience targeting, successful participation requires outreach efforts that involve as many people as possible. This requires a proactive, attention-getting strategy that also targets underrepresented groups. Using such a proactive strategy, Chattanooga, Tennessee, planners who wanted to understand public priorities gathered 2,500 responses and involved an audience wider than one that could be reached using standard public meetings:



Chattanooga Area Convention and Visitors Bureau

The Southern Belle Riverboat passing along Chattanooga’s Tennessee River waterfront. The building with pointed roof (on right, toward back) is the Tennessee Aquarium.



The Futurescape survey, carried out during 1999 in Chattanooga, was administered not just once, but over a three-week period. The survey was administered in over 80 planning forums held at public schools across the area during

this period. Planners called employers and asked managers to allow their employees time during the workday to attend the forums and complete the survey. They also called senior centers and had outings arranged to get older people to the forums.<sup>10</sup>



Town of Holly Springs

A Holly Springs, North Carolina, town council meeting. The town has sought youth input when planning for parks and other recreational facilities.

Such a proactive approach can be especially useful when engaging citizens not typically involved in the planning process, such as racial

and ethnic minorities and youths. For instance, planners in Salt Lake City contacted neighborhood leaders in the Latino community to better understand the needs and views of Hispanic residents.<sup>11</sup> In Holly Springs, North Carolina, Mayor Dick Sears formed an advisory board made up of primary and secondary school students. They provide input on recreational facilities and other issues affecting the town's youth.<sup>12</sup>

It is important for planners to understand and act when the local political context is not conducive to follow-through on the results of a strong and robust citizen participation process. In some situations, citizens get involved in a visioning and comprehensive planning effort only to see the completed plan stall or go unimplemented. In communities where this has occurred it is important to lay the groundwork and identify crucial civic, political, and other allies who can help generate public support and commitment, not only to collaborative planning, but also to plan implementation.

Meetings of one form or another are the substance behind any public participation process. They are preeminently interpersonal exercises, requiring planners not only to be approachable, personable, and professional, but also to have empathy and charisma depending on the circumstances.

Although it is not possible to provide tools for every situation involving personal interactions, experts suggest some guidelines. According to Daniel Yankelovich, considered by some the father of modern public opinion research, format is critical. During a June 1998 speech before the W.K. Kellogg Foundation addressing the devolution of local decision-making authority to citizens, he outlined guidelines for formatting a public participation program:<sup>13</sup>

- *Vary the format of citizen engagement*—Initial meetings should be short and allow people to vent their frustrations and voice their concerns. Move to longer, more substantive meetings once the dust settles. Most importantly, meetings can involve an activity that demonstrates a concept planners need to

#### 7.4.1

**Reach out to minorities and youth**

#### 7.4.2

**Lay groundwork for planning to move forward before engaging target audiences**

#### 7.4.3

**Meetings are at the core of public participation**

#### 7.4.4

**Pointers on how to format public participation programs adapted from a speech by Dennis Yankelovich**

communicate. For example, in Clarksville, Tennessee, each participant in one planning workshop was given blue stickers to put on a map of the region. Each sticker—there were 126 altogether—represented 3,700 new residents. The stickers helped give workshop participants a visual idea about the amount of population growth expected in the area during the next 20 years.<sup>14</sup>

- *Include those with contrasting perspectives on an issue*—Preaching to the converted accomplishes nothing. The most recalcitrant people on an issue often become more willing to negotiate simply by being able to air their opinions in a public forum.
- *Provide working-through experiences*—Citizen engagement involves incremental steps towards increased communication and understanding. Concentrate on achievements along the way and emphasize little successes, a technique used by planners in Kansas City, Missouri. (See *Allies and Partnerships*, part 6.2.2, for more about the approach used in Kansas City.)

Running successful meetings is essential to Yankelovich’s citizen engagement model. Elaine Cogan, a nationally recognized planning consultant, facilitator, and author of *Successful Public Meetings: A Practical Guide*, covers the nuts and bolts of successful meetings with the public in her aptly titled book.<sup>15</sup>

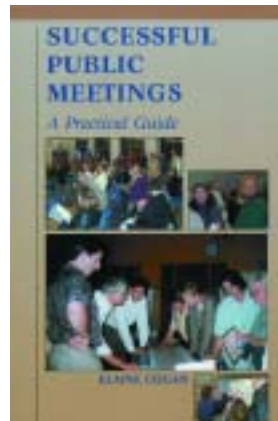
Her suggestions complement Yankelovich’s advice on format and answer the question, “How do I run the meeting once it’s underway?”

- *Organize*: Make no more than three key points; anything more indicates the audience’s key interests and needs have not been identified.
- *Practice*: Decide with others involved with the meeting who will say what when and who will answer questions. Decide on appropriate attire as a group.
- *Channel stage fright*: Arrive early to get comfortable with the room and people entering. Don’t fidget or display nervous habits in front of the audience. Speak slowly and calmly. Take breaks to collect your thoughts if needed.
- *Be conscious of non-verbal clues*: Your appearance and voice determine 93 percent of what people remember about your presentation; what is said determines the other 7 percent.

Technology and, increasingly, refined notions of participatory democracy have considerably changed how collaborative planning is viewed and practiced today. Yet

#### 7.4.5

**Elaine Cogan’s points on running a public meeting**



American Planning Association

Preparation and organization are keys to successful public meetings, notes author and planning consultant Elaine Cogan.

#### 7.4.6

**Technology has changed participation but it’s still up to the presenter to bring it all together**

creating and delivering effective presentations remains a crucial element of a planner's role in public participation. Despite all of the technology available, presentations still must engage your audience. To do this, presentations need to be delivered as though you were having an individual conversation with every member of that audience. Presentations should capture the attention of the audience from the outset with innovative content and energetic delivery. Studies show that most listeners form their opinion of the speaker and subject within the first 30 seconds. This is your only opportunity to focus their attention on those three points you'll make in a well-

organized presentation. Use easily remembered and quotable sound bites in your opening remarks.

Photographs and visuals also are important elements of an interesting presentation. Models, forecasts, and build-out scenarios can help convey to your audience the positive impact a comprehensive plan can have and why planning is relevant to a community's future. Planners in Gallatin County, Montana, used



Gallatin County Planning Department

Cover of an information brochure used to help generate citizen interest and participation in updating a comprehensive plan for Gallatin County, Montana.

geographic information system-derived growth scenario maps to give citizens a clear, vivid choice of what the region could look like under different growth options.<sup>16</sup>

Another way to maintain audience attention is through storytelling. Great stories don't have to be long and drawn out—they just need to paint a vivid picture of events in your audience's mind. U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer from Portland, Oregon, is a well-known planning ally and adroit in using words to paint a vivid picture: "They [streetcars] are city shapers. That's exactly what the Portland Streetcar has been too...the streetcar was an important catalyst in the reclamation of the Hoyt Street rail yards which would otherwise have been a 70-acre industrial brownfield."<sup>17</sup>



Portland Bureau of Planning

An important chapter in Portland, Oregon's successful planning story is the city's comprehensive public transit system, which includes street cars.

Other ways to keep audiences interested during public meetings, besides interactive workshops and breakout sessions, are:

- Visual preference surveys, a way for citizens to rank different architectural styles, urban designs, and other elements based on example slides. These

**7.4.7**  
**Visuals hit hard in presentations**

**7.4.8**  
**Paint an interesting picture using a story**

**7.4.9**  
**Visual preference surveys and electronically facilitated town meetings help keep audiences engaged**



surveys are especially useful in helping audiences understand and avoid confusion when discussing urban affordable housing, density, and other sensitive issues. (For more information about these surveys visit <http://www.lgc.org/services/cis/index.html>.)

- Facilitated town meetings and workshops using electronic communications technology to enable hundreds or thousands of people to participate in a discussion and learn about each other's ideas and opinions. Hamilton County, Ohio, northern Illinois, Oakland Mills, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. are among the places where this tool has been used. (For more information visit <http://www.americaspeaks.org>.)

## 7.5 Participation and controversy

While controversy often erupts at many points during the planning process, engaging citizens in meaningful participation can help resolve contentious issues, as in St. Paul, Minnesota, where the city undertook a \$160 million downtown waterfront revitalization project:

St. Paul has a long tradition of citizen involvement in planning, dating back to the mid-1970s when a system of district advisory councils was established to obtain citizen input from the city's different neighborhoods. This system provided a proven way for residents to express their ideas about the kind of development they thought would be appropriate for eight blocks along the Mississippi River in downtown St. Paul.

However, when a master plan for the site was approved in November 2000 and subsequently released to the public in January 2001, changes had been made by the developer, Centex, Inc. Residents of Irvine Park, which is behind and above the proposed development, raised objections that the height of the proposed residences would obstruct existing views of the river. The developer agreed to scale back the condominium buildings from eight to six stories.

City planners, aware of the distrust that had developed between neighborhood residents and the developer, initiated another channel to ensure that good communication continued between all parties when construction began. This new approach, which the city now uses for all large-scale development projects, involved a series of advisory committees that augmented the District Advisory Councils. The committees comprised neighborhood leaders, planners, developers, and city officials and provided a forum where issues were discussed and meaningfully addressed.

In this development, which is now nearly complete, citizens played a critical role in ensuring that the developer was kept "accountable to the master plan," said St. Paul senior planner Lucy Thompson.<sup>18</sup>

### 7.5.1

**Participation keeps developers accountable and citizens content in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota, redevelopment project**

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