

Meaningful to Citizens – Functional for Planning: Using Public Participation Tools to Accomplish Planning Tasks

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(From The Land Use Tracker, Volume 3, Issue 3 Winter 2003)

Is your community getting what it needs from efforts to involve the public? Are your citizens satisfied with their opportunities to become involved in planning? When participation can be expensive and time consuming, citizens, planners, and local officials expect a return from the time or money they invest (Heberlein, 1974). Planners and local officials want participation to be functional for planning. They want participation to instill trust with citizens and want the community-plan to enjoy public acceptance. Citizens want their involvement to be meaningful. They want to influence the plan that ultimately affects their property and quality of life. Planners, officials, and citizens get what they want when the public is involved to accomplish planning tasks. This article is intended to help local officials and plan committee/commission members better understand the purpose for citizen involvement and how citizens can be productive for planning. Commissioners and officials may not be expected to create a public participation plan after reading this article, but will know better how to make public involvement functional for planning yet meaningful to citizens.

Blueprint for Results: The Planning Process

A typical planning process is much like a blueprint, and is a good place to begin when thinking about how to involve citizens. The plan process describes a set of stages to follow, a set of topics to cover, and a set of tasks to achieve, or products to create (see Insert).

- **Planning stages** illustrate the broad path where planning is headed. Stages describe most generally what happens first, next, and last, such as setting goals, setting objectives, and forming strategies.
- **Planning issues** are possible topics to cover. In Wisconsin, issues are called elements, and nine must be covered to consider a plan comprehensive. Natural resources, housing, and transportation are some examples of planning issues.
 - **Planning tasks** are assignments to accomplish to create a plan and are more specific than issues and stages. Planning tasks tell the planner, step by step, what must be done to ultimately create a plan. In Stage I, data collection and analysis, tasks include, among others; identifying data needs, gathering data, and analyzing data for patterns or trends.

It is important to note that participation does not happen at any one stage or isn't a single task, but rather happens concurrently, or runs parallel to the plan process to achieve many

tasks. When a planning task must be completed, participation is considered along with other planning tools to achieve it. Planning tasks provide great cues about how to involve citizens for planning.

Choosing Appropriate Public Involvement

A thorough plan process not only illustrates what must be accomplished and when, but also prompts planners to ask, “What is needed to accomplish this task?” The answer includes public participation when the following is needed:

- 1) **Public Opinion:** Planners need more information about what citizens value, desire, or believe, so decisions made or planning products created represent citizen interests.
- 2) **Public Expertise:** Citizens can verify or supplement factual information with their practical experiences, so more credible, locally realistic solutions are reached.
- 3) **Public Acceptance/Influence:** Before decisions or planning products are acceptable, planners need or the public wants to share influence over decision-making between local officials and citizens.

Five Categories of Involvement

Identifying what is needed from citizens, whether it is their opinions, expertise, acceptance, or some combination, helps define the purpose for citizen involvement in planning. Citizen involvement is often classified into five categories: Awareness, Education, Input, Interaction, and Partnership (UWEX, 2001).

1. **Awareness:** Awareness approaches are used to publicize upcoming participation events or decisions/products already made. Awareness techniques are always needed for successful citizen involvement. Citizens cannot be involved if they don’t know about an event or are unaware about how to participate. Effective awareness tools not only state the ‘when,’ ‘where,’ and ‘what’ of the event, but also stimulate interest.

Example Awareness Tools

Public notice: the minimum legal requirement necessary to advertise opportunities for public participation. Notice is usually posted in public places and newspapers.

Direct Mail: mass mailing of letters, brochures, or other promotional pieces to increase awareness or advertise a particular event. This method works well to target specific groups, but is cost prohibitive as a general awareness raising tool.

Mass media: the use of radio, television, newspapers, local publications, and other media sources to disseminate information. Used to keep the planning project in the public eye and inform the public regarding developments and decisions in the planning process. Able to reach a large number of people, but may suffer from editing or bad coverage.

2. **Education:** Educational approaches provide citizens with balanced and objective information. Education is used to build citizens’ capacity to become further involved to help achieve tasks. Education should be used before citizens participate in decision-making (Thomas). Just as a general shouldn’t send an ill-equipped,

untrained soldier to battle, untrained citizens shouldn't be involved to make complex or significant decisions. Untrained citizens may feel uncomfortable participating or may wed themselves to decisions made from poor information, or worse, speculation.

Example Education Tools

Newsletter: a local publication and consistent source of information used to keep the public informed and educated about the stages of the planning project.

Open house: a semi-informal setting in which technical experts and displays are used to inform the public about the planning effort. Also serves as an opportunity for the public to ask questions, express concerns and provide feedback about proposals.

3. Input: Public input provides a means for decision-makers to learn more about public sentiments and capture citizen values. Decision-makers use public input to gather information about the public before moving on to accomplish tasks that fit citizens' desires, values, or beliefs.

Example Input Tools

Survey: used to systematically collect data or viewpoints from many people. Sample must be chosen carefully to represent appropriate population. Questions should be simple, jargon-free, and brief.

Visual Preference Survey: a tool to gauge citizen preferences of various visual alternatives. Best used for site-specific applications, such as selecting building types for a subdivision.

4 Interaction: Interaction tools provide an opportunity to exchange information and expertise openly between planners and citizens. Interaction provides planners with more information, derived from citizen experiences, to make better-informed decisions.

Partnerships: Citizens are invited to help make decisions collaboratively with local officials. The result is citizen ownership and acceptance of planning decisions or products, and often, more thoughtful decisions.

Example Interaction or Partnership Tools

Workshop: interactive meeting where a facilitator stimulates the flow of ideas among participants. Multiple methods may be used including brainstorming, small group discussions, and a variety of group process techniques. Presenters, panels, videos, maps, models and other visual or active devices may also be used to stimulate discussion.

Citizen Commission: citizen committee designed to make decisions and make decisions regarding community planning. Makes recommendations to the governing body for final decision.

When public opinion is needed, input methods or tools are used to gather them. If citizen expertise is required, then citizens are best involved through interaction. If the purpose is to share influence or gain public acceptance, then citizens can be directly involved in decision-making through partnerships. Whereas, input, interaction, and partnerships use citizens to directly accomplish tasks, awareness and education do not. Rather, their purpose is to create an opportunity for more effective involvement by building the capacity of citizens to participate (Thomas, 1995).

Choosing Tools to Involve Citizens and Achieve Tasks

Once the purpose for citizen involvement is identified, specific public participation tools can be chosen to accomplish tasks. Participation methods are like any other planning tool (population projections, geographical information systems (GIS), multiple regression statistics). They help planners achieve tasks concurrent to the planning process (see Figure 1, Planning Tools). For example, employing GIS tools and soils data help planners identify productive areas for corn. A workshop, a participation tool that stimulates ideas from participants, could invite local farmers to identify locally productive agricultural locations. Used concurrently, both tools, the GIS and the workshop, help achieve a planning task, locating productive agricultural areas. The participation tool, not only achieves the task, but also builds public ownership and acceptance of the decision. Citizens have influence over the decision-made, and planners achieve a task. By involving local farmers, a better, more politically salient solution emerges, than by using GIS alone. See Box 1 for more examples of selecting participation tools to achieve planning tasks.

Document Participation Activities and Results:

A final, yet important step in a public participation program is to document how the public has participated in planning, and how that involvement has influenced the plan. For example, if a community survey was conducted, planners should document both the survey and results. They should make it openly available to the public, whether on-line, in paper copy, through media coverage, or a combination of outlets. Be explicit so citizens see in plain language how their involvement was used to influence the plan. Documentation also works to satisfy those citizens that haven't had a chance to participate (Heberlein). Citizens can examine past activities that involved the public, see how that participation influenced the plan, and perhaps feel that their points of view were accounted for (Sanoff, 2000). Participation that actually engages citizens to functionally achieve tasks is an indicator of success and well worth documenting.

Conclusion

Participation is an investment made by planners, officials, and citizens, and all expect to see a substantial return on their investments. Using public participation, like any other planning tool to achieve tasks, is functional for planners. Through citizen involvement, more thoughtful decisions emerge and a more credible plan is created. Citizens can be involved many ways to influence decision-making, and planners value the information or partnerships that result. Documenting participation activities and results, and explaining how participation has influenced decision-making, shows citizens just how much their

efforts are valued. Citizens see their ownership in the community plan and participation becomes meaningful to citizens. The plan process is a good guide for planners. Following the plan process blueprint and using participation as a tool to complete tasks in the blueprint, provides a win-win situation for planners and the citizens they involve.

Acknowledgements

Mark Hilliker (Portage County CRD Educator), Sarah Attwood (WDNR), Jennifer Higgins, Village of Weston Planner, and the CLUE staff have reviewed this article for form and content. Any errors, mistakes, and omissions remain the responsibility of the author.

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