

Public Meetings

Hope for the Best, Prepare for the Rest

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As a local official, you've likely participated in many meetings. Some of them good; some of them not so good. Surely you've attended or even planned a meeting where nothing seemed to go quite right.

Perhaps no one showed up or more people showed up than expected. Perhaps an angry audience member continually interrupted the speaker or, even worse, frustrated board members resorted to arguing among themselves. Whatever the case, you no doubt remember the cloud of frustration and dissatisfaction that lingered after such a meeting.

Although it is nearly impossible to anticipate every glitch or outburst that may arise at a public meeting, it is possible to minimize the chances that these situations will occur. By considering some basic information about these meetings, it is possible to overcome—or at least be prepared to handle—even the most challenging circumstances.

Knowing the Rules

All 50 states have laws concerning public meetings. These laws, commonly referred to as sunshine laws or open meetings laws, typically require that any meeting or document discussing public business be open to the public. The purpose of making these meetings and documents accessible is not only to accommodate the public's observance of government activities, but also to allow them to participate in—or at least not be deliberately excluded from—the decision-making process.

Because nearly every activity of local governments (including municipal boards) must be performed in meetings open to the public, gaining a working knowledge of these laws is an essential item in every board member's toolbox.

"It's super critical," says Phil Walsack, a project manager with Farr West Engineering, referring to the responsibility of board members to fully understand their state's open meetings laws. Although open meetings laws vary in language, he says, "They are the same in that they are readily available."

The Importance of Leadership

"The single most important ingredient in assuring a successful public meeting is clear and decisive leadership," says Elaine Cogan, author and communications strategist, in *Successful Public Meetings: A Practical Guide*.

Whether knowing pertinent laws, planning, organizing, communicating with the public, or keeping the meeting on track, nearly every factor in a meeting depends upon leadership. Good leaders know enough about these issues that they are capable of recognizing when things are getting off track or not getting done at all.

Although strong leadership might be considered the most important ingredient in assuring a successful public meeting, it is not the only ingredient. Behind every strong leader is an equally strong and committed staff. A successful leader is capable of motivating staff members by recognizing their strengths and weaknesses and making the most of the situation by assigning duties that suit each person.

"Lead, don't micromanage," Walsack says. "Don't let the chairman be overwhelming and don't let the board get off track. Have a shared responsibility."

Duty to Inform

One of the most important tasks for any meeting planner is including the public in the process. But how will the public know when or how to participate?

Most open meetings laws require that an advance notice of each meeting of a public body be provided in written form. Often this is accomplished by posting a notice in a public place such as a county courthouse, library, or other municipal building. Some communities even have local cable television channels designated

Open Meetings Basics

Although open meetings laws vary from state to state, there are some basic similarities:

- Open meetings most often refer to an official gathering of a public body for the purpose of conducting public business. A public body might include groups such as planning boards, zoning boards, volunteer fire companies, municipal water boards, and school boards.
- A quorum—usually defined, as a majority of a group's members—must be present in order for the open meetings law to apply.
- Open meetings laws do not typically apply to social gatherings or chance meetings.
- The right to participate in a public meeting may be limited to the public body depending on the type of meeting that is being conducted. If the public is allowed to speak during a meeting, there may be specific rules for participants to follow.
- An advanced public notice of a meeting is usually required.
- During an "executive" or "closed" session, the public may be excluded from participating in a meeting because the issues being discussed are considered to imperil public or private safety if specific information is disclosed. The decision to go into executive session must be approved by a majority of a group's members during an open session.

Source: Adapted from *Conducting Public Meetings and Public Hearings*.



for advertising community events, such as public meetings. Local news media are often included in this notification process as well.

Remember that notice requirements vary from state to state. Thus, determining specific requirements is a critical task for any planner. If inadequate notice is given, a municipality not only risks the chance of unnecessarily generating distrust and frustration among the public, but also having decisions reversed and projects halted by legal actions being taken against them as a result of their mistakes.

Organization

Along with good leadership, planning and organization certainly contribute to the success of a public meeting.

The Ohio State University Extension's Community Development fact sheet *Planning and Conducting Effective Public Meetings* states, "meetings not planned well often leave participants frustrated and believing that attending the meeting was a waste of their time."

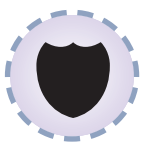
Well-planned meetings are generally more focused and use time more efficiently—an accomplishment not only planners appreciate, but the public too. When planning and organizing for your meeting, New York State Tug Hill Commission's booklet *Conducting Public Meetings and Hearings* recommends the following steps to help you along the way:



Determine your purpose. While many states and municipalities have requirements about what type of meeting must be conducted under particular circumstances, Cogan says that all meetings happen for three general purposes: (1) to provide information, (2) to give advice, or (3) to solve problems.



Prepare and distribute a draft agenda. Before any meeting takes place, a draft agenda should be distributed to board members and other meeting participants to help them become familiar with the upcoming issues and the proposed actions. Be sure to include a deadline for submitting agenda items.



Invite experts and public officials. What outside experts are involved with the scheduled project? Engineers? Health officials? Attorneys? Contact stakeholder groups with a vested interest in the project.



Prepare background information. What information must be prepared before the meeting? Who will prepare it for the board?



Reserve space for the meeting. What kind of meeting space is required? Consider who will reserve the meeting facility, as well as open and set it up in advance.



Arrange for special equipment. Arrange for presentation equipment—microphones, speakers, projectors, power cords, equipment stands, charts, markers, and other items—to be available ahead of the meeting. Have technical assistance people on hand to check the equipment

beforehand. Be sure the meeting space has an adequate power supply, including accessible power outlets.

Anticipate other needs. Do you need permission to use the meeting space? Do you have a key to the meeting room? Is it handicapped accessible? Does the community you are working with have special language needs? Is an interpreter needed?



Confirm attendance. Call board members to confirm that they will be attending the meeting. Remember, a quorum is usually necessary to take action on any issues.



Review ground rules. Board members should each review the ground rules needed to run the meeting. Check the board's bylaws. Familiarity with these rules and procedures will help the meeting proceed more efficiently.



"Give the board as much backup [information] as you can before the meeting," Walsack says. "One of the reasons is because if the meeting is public, you would like the board to be able to talk about that issue."

(More information about public participation may be found in the article "Getting Citizens Involved: Public Participation Helps Communities and Residents" available on the National Environmental Services Center Web site at www.nesc.wvu.edu.)



Recognizing Your Efforts

A great deal goes into a successful public meeting. By thinking ahead, planners and board members create an atmosphere that allows more attention to the matters at hand. In this sense, not only are board members satisfied because they are capable of talking and acting upon issues with greater resolve, but the public is also more likely to be satisfied as well, because less time is wasted dealing with the distractions of an ill-prepared meeting.

New York State's Tug Hill Commission document *Conducting Public Meetings and Public Hearings* says, "When a public board lets citizens know when they are meeting and the issues to be addressed, they take an important first step in establishing a climate of government based on respect for the constituent's judgment.



Items to Include in a Public Notice

By facilitating public attendance at board meetings, the board can ensure the circulation of firsthand information about why it acted as it did and prevent the spread of misinformation. Although concerned citizens may not have been permitted to participate in the debate of a particular issue, nor agree with the board's decision, they will however have had the opportunity to witness the decision-making process and to hear the true rationale behind the decision."

It is important for planners and board members not to underestimate their roles in the democratic process. By learning the ins and outs of the rules and regulations that impact the public meetings process, meeting planners are taking the first step toward bringing government into the open and allowing the public to be included with many of the decisions that affect their daily lives.

References

Cogan, Elaine. 2000. *Conducting Successful Public Meetings: A Practical Guide*. Chicago: American Planning Association.

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New York State Tug Hill Commission. *Conducting Public Meetings and Hearings*. James A. Coon Local Government Technical Series. Available online at www.dos.state.ny.us/lgss/pdfs/public.pdf. Accessed October 25, 2004.

Ohio State University Extension. *Planning and Conducting Effective Public Meetings*. Available online at ohioline.osu.edu/cd-fact/1555.html. Accessed October 25, 2004.

For More Information

To learn more about your state's public meetings laws, read "Tapping Officials' Secrets," a complete listing of open meetings laws at www.rcfp.org/cgiloal/tapping/index.cgi.

The Management Assistance Program for Non-profits provides a free Complete Toolkit for Boards concerning conducting effective board meeting. This comprehensive resource is available online at www.mapnp.org/library/boards/boards.htm#anchor580207. Other information about conducting public meetings is available online from the Ohio State University Extension at: www.ohioline.osu.edu/cd-fact/1555.html.

Many boards have a set of rules and guidelines for maintaining conduct and order at public meetings.

The following items are typically included in a public notice:

- **Purpose of the meeting.** The purpose of the meeting can generally be used as the title or heading for a notice. Consider these questions: Are decisions being made? What kind of meeting format (informational, advisory, or problem-solving) should be used? Is the public allowed to speak?
- **Action being taken.** What will be the outcome of the meeting? A new rule or regulation? A rate increase? Another meeting?
- **Date, time, and place.** Do not bury this information! Provide directions to the meeting, as well as alternative information in the event of inclement weather.
- **Financial implications.** How much will the proposals being considered cost? How will it be funded? Will it cost the ordinary citizen? If so, how much?
- **Citizen participation.** Will the public be allowed to speak? If so, do they need to sign up in advance? Provide the appropriate information and contacts for the public to make their requests. Is there a time limit on the amount of time they are allowed to speak? Make this clear! It could save you from a heated debate when an angry citizen claiming that they were not aware of any time restrictions confronts you at a meeting.
- **Contact information.** Include all the appropriate contact information about the agency or group holding the meeting. Also consider: Who is fielding general questions and comments about the meeting? Who is dealing with public requests to speak? Who is dealing with special needs and handicapped accessibility issues? Provide phone numbers and e-mail addresses if possible. If the information is available on the Internet, provide the URL.
- **Legal requirements.** Some states' open meetings laws require that public notices be posted in legal language often understood by no one other than the person who drafted the document. If this is the case in your state, attach a "citizen-friendly" notice in order to inform the public in plain language about what is taking place.
- **Other information.** Although you do not want to overload a notice with so much information that it appears cluttered, consider including maps and pictures of proposed projects. This may help the public identify with the issue and encourage their participation.

Source: Adapted from *Successful Public Meetings: A Practical Guide*.

Robert's Rules of Order is popular among the boards of many cities and towns. The more familiar board members are with these rules, the better a meeting will proceed. To learn more about Robert's Rules of Order, visit www.mapnp.org/library/boards/roberts.htm.

The EPA guide It's Your Drinking Water: Get to Know It and Protect It! is available online at www.epa.gov/safewater/consumer/itsyours.html. The guide provides information for taking advantage of public involvement opportunities involving drinking water regulations and answers many of the questions concerning this process.💧

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