The Public Participation Process
Bob Webb

Introduction

I joined the planning profession with a Bachelor's Degree in Biology and a Master's Degree in Public Administration, and after a 12 year career in the active Army. I mention this as context to explain how public participation in the planning process was an alien concept for me when I was hired as an Assistant Planner for Washoe County. I was teamed with an experienced Planner to complete the last drafts of an area master plan before its public release, and I quickly learned the hard truth about planning: public participation in the planning process is a mandatory element and woe be unto any planner who neglects such participation.

Reflections on Public Participation

Now, that might be a bit "over the top", but in truth, public participation in planning is a time honored and almost sacred duty of planning professionals. For experienced, school-trained planners such as my team leader at Washoe County, public participation was a constant mantra during schooling. Volumes have been written, and duly read by planning students, on the importance of public participation and how best to garner such participation.

As I gained more experience in my planning career, particularly early in my career as I

was responsible to create and move six area master plans through adoption, I became a devout disciple of planning participation in any planning process. I embraced the value of reaching out to the public early in the planning process to engage community members in the initial creation of land use maps, goals, polices and action plans. I championed any and all efforts to reach out to the community so all citizens would have an opportunity to participate in public review of draft plans. I diligently included sections devoted to the public participation process in staff reports, and emphasized the outcomes of the participation to appointed and elected officials during adoption.

However, deep inside me there lurked lingering doubts as to the value of the public participation. Did I really reach a representative sample of the community? Did I truly engage a cross section of the citizens, or only attract those who were either adamantly opposed to the plan (or parts of the plan) or were such wholehearted supporters as to almost be suspect in their support (e.g., citizen planners who participation is more of a hobby)? Did I use sufficient methods to advertise and seek public participation? The low numbers of public attending the many meetings, workshops and public meetings before boards made me question the value of the efforts to gather public

participation? Was I merely spinning my wheels to "check a box"?

Recently, I helped judge another State's planning award submissions. Public participation was one of the judging criteria, and it accounted for 14% of the total criteria (there were 10 total criteria). I was impressed by all of the public participation outreach methods described in the submissions; the jurisdictions used several public outreach methods, several of which were very innovative. However, public engagement (actual number of returned surveys, or public attending events) remained low compared to the jurisdiction's population. This judging started me thinking anew about public participation, and how to best leverage public participation in the planning process.

My Google searches revealed that there are two basic components to any "survey": sample size (number of people sent a survey) and sample size percentage. Most statisticians target between 43 and 51% of a population to be a valid statistical sample percentage. Interesting, the "universal truth" of any survey is to expect a 10 to 15% return rate on external surveys. I hope that those planners reading this paper who have a better grasp of statistics can provide some more insight, but for this paper I will assume that a target is to achieve between 10 and 15% responses on a survey (from the target population), and likewise for those attending public functions.

My experience in people attending public functions varies widely when compared to a target population. I hosted a public meeting in Gerlach, in which 40 people attended (40 out of a population of 100 is a 40% return rate, which is outstanding!). However, I was thrilled when 300 people attended a public workshop in the Southwest Truckee

Meadows. Yet, those 300 people represented only 1% of the estimated 28,000 population in the Southwest at the time. So perhaps my perceptions are in error, and as planners we need to realize that numbers at a public function are not the only indicator of a "good" public participation process.

Based on this epiphany, I suggest that there are two major components to any public participation process: 1) public outreach and 2) public responses. Both are equally important, and the first leads directly to the second (without outreach, there is no participation). There are a myriad of public outreach methods, several of which I will outline below (in no particular order or preference). I encourage my fellow planners to expand and expound upon this list as a tool to help others when designing a public participation process.

Public Outreach Methods

Public outreach methods can generally be divided into surveys, citizen groups, citizen committees, community gatherings, stakeholder groups, steering committees, postcard notices, public workshops, and public meetings.

Surveys

Surveys tend to fall into three groups: in-person, written and on-line. In-person (e.g., telephone) surveys are really a tool of the past, and are probably not the best tool for planners to employ (besides, they tend to be expensive and involve third parties). There has been a noticeable shift to on-line surveys, and the ease of use for the survey respondent has been easier to achieve with many on-line applications (e.g., Survey Monkey). The survey instrument used by

the Truckee Meadows Regional Planning Agency is a particularly powerful tool. However, do not discount written surveys. These surveys are key in gathering public responses at community gatherings (see below).

Citizen Groups

Citizen groups are usually not planning centric, but exist for other reasons. However, their establishment within any community, and support by a portion of the community, make them valuable methods to reach out to different audiences within a community. Examples of such groups include parent/teacher organizations, chamber of commerce, business associations, wildlife protection groups, parks and trails advocates, "fraternal" organizations (e.g., Rotary Club, Optimist Club, Lion's Club, etc.), veteran's organizations, and many others. Do a bit of research to find these citizen groups within your community, then reach out to them to ask if they will be willing to participate in the public outreach for a plan or project.

Citizen Committees

Citizen committees are typically appointed by elected officials and, therefore, are subject to public notice and public open meeting law requirements. Citizen committees usually provide non-binding advice and recommendations. They also tend to be established for more than planning purposes, they may serve to provide advice on a wide range of matters of interest to the elected officials. Since the Committees are established by elected officials, there is an expectation that they be involved in public planning processes which will lead to a decision by the elected officials.

Community Gatherings

Community gathering are opportunities for planners to leverage existing community events to gather public responses. These opportunities are often classified as "pop up" meetings. Community gathering responses are best suited for community events with a "central" gathering place for the public (e.g., street market, street fair, event downtown, etc.). However, community gatherings also work well at a specific location, especially to target hard to reach populations (e.g., erecting a booth outside of a market frequented by the Hispanic community). Planners at community gatherings can provide information, educate about the planning process, gather feedback (usually through written surveys), and provide information about upcoming public forums.

Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder groups are formed with a representation of the community (e.g., contains minority group members or age specific members), or of interests within a community (e.g., business, chamber of commerce, industry, etc.). Stakeholders often are appointed by elected officials, though some groups are more informal with membership being selected by the groups represented by the stakeholders. Stakeholder groups tend to meet infrequently during the planning process, often due to the large size/composition of such groups. Typically, the group will be convened early in the process for "feedback" and towards the end of the process for final thoughts/approval.

Steering Committees

Steering committees are usually formed by planners seeking a public group who will

participate in the planning process from initiation through adoption. Committee members may be appointed by elected officials, nominated by stakeholders, selected by planning staff, or through other methods. It is anticipated that Committee members will meet frequently throughout the planning process, and are expected to attend all meetings. Usually, planners request that Committee members publically endorse the final product of their efforts, either in writing or at a public forum.

Postcard Notices

Postcard notices are the "tried and true" method to inform the public about upcoming public forums. The traditional notice is mailed through the US Postal Service based on property owner addresses garnered from the County's Assessor's records. Two challenges with this mailing notice are reaching residents who are not property owners (e.g., rental tenants) and reaching apartment complex residents (typically, Assessor's records do not track non property owners of apartments, townhomes, condos, etc). Notices are also sent to those citizens who sign up for e-mail notification, either with a department specifically, or as part of a general notification list hosted by an agency (e.g., let me know about any planning topics).

Public Workshops

Public Workshops are hosted by a planning organization (public or private), usually at a central location within a targeted community. Workshops tend to be designed to function either as an "open house" (drop by anytime between these hours to talk with a planner, provide input, etc.), or as a "structured" workshop (formal presentations, followed by a period for questions and answers). In either case (or combinations of the two), a workshop is a method which enables planners to focus public attendance to a specific location, date and time (thus, saving resources).

Public Meetings

This method is the most obvious for public sector planners, as it is the "fallback" method to gather public input on a plan or project, and is often mandated by State Law and/or local ordinances. I define public meetings as any meeting before an elected or appointed board, in which minimum public notice requirements are established. For many public sector planners, this is the one method which must be used as part of any public participation process.

Public Response

Public outreach methods lead directly into the second component of the public participation process: public responses. Based on my experiences in Washoe County, public participation numbers can vary widely, usually based upon perceived "hot button" topics and/or upon a robust "telephone" network within a community that rouses public participation. Since you, as a planner, cannot control the numbers of public who choose to participate in a planning process, I suggest that you must "take what you can get" and report honestly on the results from any public outreach method. So what if only 15 people attend a public workshop, make sure you record all of their suggestions and comments and reflect those in your staff report or compilation document. It is also important to inform those who attended the forum that you will record their thoughts, such information reassures the public that their attendance was not a waste of time.

Be truthful with your outreach response statistics. If only 20% of your outreach audience responded to your on-line survey, let your elected and/or appointed official know of the return rate. This will help set the context of responses in the scope of the larger percentage of the population which chose to not participate. The unsaid component of emphasizing the response rate is that the officials should not overweigh the responses, given that they have no real idea about how the other 80% of the population feels on the plan/project/issue. To me, this is key to the public participation process: be transparent with your elected/appointed officials, let them know who and how you reached out to the community (the methods), the response rate, and a non-biased evaluation of how that response rate compares to the community.

I should note that response rate not only includes the number of people who respond, but also should incorporate the composition of a community. For example, if a community is over 40% Hispanic, then there should be a corresponding relationship between Hispanics who did or did not respond to a public outreach method. The same applies to race composition and to country of origin composition. Learn about your community's composition before selecting your public outreach method, some methods work better for some groups. Reflect your community's composition in your staff report or compilation document, it will help provide a better picture of the community for elected and appointed officials.

Conclusion

In conclusion, public participation is a valuable component of any public planning process. Planners should carefully consider the public participation component when determining the steps or stages involved within the planning process. How will I enable public outreach? How will I gather, collate, and present the public responses? A robust and comprehensive public participation process will ensure the public is present in public planning.