

Enhancing Civic Engagement Through Environmental Initiatives: Beyond the Public Hearing

This presentation embodies the value of effectively engaging citizenry and developing partnerships in order to integrate environmental protection and restoration activities into public policies and programs.

Summary

Local governments are very familiar with the need to incorporate scientific and technical information in making decisions about growth and natural resource protection. They also recognize the need to involve the public to ensure public concerns, needs, and values are incorporated into governmental decision-making. However the level of engagement of stakeholders as partners in the decision-making process varies widely. For sustainable growth to occur in NC, local governments will be called on to rethink how they involve their citizens. Incorporating scientific, technical, and local understanding can lead to decision-making that yields more implementable policies and projects. A commitment to public participation though is not without challenges and controversy. Local governments face budget and legal constraints; political implications; and decisions that need to be made expeditiously.

Fears of conflict and losing control, increased costs and time, and lack of trust are all reasons public and private organizations hesitate to open up decision-making processes to more active public involvement. Yet despite these hurdles, local governments within North Carolina are providing striking examples of effective public engagement in making public policy decisions. The complexities of managing both growth and natural resource protection often benefit from more, not less, public involvement.

Benefits of involving the public are summarized here in four categories:

- ***Increases Potential Solutions to the Issues***

Stakeholders in the community may have a unique understanding of the issues. Involving others in decision-making processes may result in a greater number of options to solutions than when only internal stakeholders and consultants are involved.

- ***Results in Implementable Decisions***

Involving those up front who may otherwise not understand or support public decisions increases trust in those who participate, increases stakeholders' sense of purpose and ownership, and mitigates conflict between economic growth and environmental protection. A more transparent process yields decisions that are more legitimate to those involved and their constituencies.

- ***Increases Leveraging of Resources***

The costs of possibly making a wrong decision are reduced when those who may oppose the decision are involved in making that decision. Funding agencies and foundations are increasingly requiring active multi-stakeholder involvement as prerequisites for grants. Stakeholders may also bring resources to the table that local governments were unaware of, including time and funds that can help with cost sharing on grants.

- ***Increases Civic Engagement in Community***

Inviting citizens to engage in decision-making builds social capital, the community's ability to engage in collective action for community betterment. Citizens who engage in environmental projects often learn about civic processes for the first time, and become more interested in civic engagement. They are more likely to get involved in future community efforts, sometimes becoming empowered to lead these efforts.

Strategies and Tools

The three coastal case studies illustrate a number of techniques for involving outside stakeholders. Sometimes these entailed involving citizen representatives, sometimes these involved creating partnerships with groups of varying, seemingly opposing, interests. All three case studies illustrate the benefits and lessons learned by engaging partners early in developing (and implementing) growth strategies.

For any public involvement process, it is useful to keep in mind some basic accepted principles, called "Core Values" (developed by the International Association of Public Participation and quoted by the US Environmental Protection Agency in various publications). Regardless of the amount of funding or time a local government is able to provide for public involvement, applying these principles will help result in better decisions and improved relations with citizens.

Core Values for the Practice of Public Participation

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

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Suggested Reading Materials (and References):

Beierle, Thomas & Cayford, Jerry (2002). Democracy in Practice: Public Participation in Environmental Decisions. Washington, DC; Resources for the Future.

Creighton, James (2005). *The Public Participation Handbook: Making Better Decisions Through Citizen Involvement*. San Francisco; Jossey-Bass.

Winchester, Benjamin & Loehr, Emily (2005). *Facilitating Civic Connections Through Social Capital*. University of Minnesota Morris, Center for Small Towns. www.centerforsmalltowns.org.

International Association for Public Participation at www.iap2.org

Getting to Growth: 100 Policies for Implementation is available for free from the ICMA website: To download it as a PDF <http://www.smartgrowth.org/pdf/gettosg2.pdf>

To order a hard copy version, get directions as

http://bookstore.icma.org/Getting_to_Smart_Growth_II_10_P1041C17.cfm

Examples of public participation in England

<http://www.local.odpm.gov.uk/research/democ/pubrprt.pdf>