

The Executive

Conducting Public Hearings: The Parks and Recreation Planning Process



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INTRODUCTION

Critical to proper planning in parks and recreation or any other public sector work is the gathering and understanding of the thoughts of the citizens that the agency serves. This aspect is so important that most proposed projects require that some sort of public input process occur, be recorded and hopefully used by the agency. The collection of public input can be accomplished by any one of a number of mechanisms. They include:

Public Input Methods	
1	Citizen based surveys
2	Program evaluations
3	Focus groups
4	Field interviews
5	Key group sessions
6	User summits
7	Public hearings

Each of these different approaches has its place depending upon what the agency is attempting to accomplish. For example, if it is important to have a cross section of citizens who are mathematically representative of the total citizenry, then the more expensive, labor intensive and multi-month citizen survey would be appropriate. If, on the other hand, the agency was interested in the very specific input of a small set of users, then in-field interviews, at the activity site with those involved users would probably work best.

Probably the most common and often used method of collecting public input comes through the use of the public hearing method. This approach finds its history in the idea that each individual should have the opportunity to participate in the governing process at least to the extent of hearing the discussion of others, and if they choose, to actually voice their views by speaking at these public forums. The idea underlying the public hearing is that it is democracy in action.

PUBLIC HEARING MODELS

There are four ways to conduct public hearings, each with its independent and specific purpose. It is important for the agency personnel to select and utilize the public hearing model that best achieves the purpose and need for the public hearing and most effectively captures quality citizen input. The four public hearing models are:

Public Hearing Models	
1	Open forum format
2	Discussion focused model
3	Presentation based approach
4	Priority-setting method

The following is a short overview of each of these models:

1. Open Forum Format

Citizens attend a public hearing that is widely announced and are free to participate if they choose. The topic of the hearing is more general and citizens express what views they desire to share. It is not uncommon for time limits to be set on the length of this type of public hearing.

2. Discussion Focused Model

In this type of public hearing, citizens are invited to participate in a discussion about a specific topic. Citizens are invited through newspaper announcement or by specific invitation. Dialogue, discussion and perhaps debate are the hallmarks of this type of hearing. Generally these input sessions involve few citizens and are roundtable in format.

3. Presentation Based Approach

Citizens are invited to a public hearing that is either widely or narrowly announced and are generally free to ask questions and make comments. The topic of the hearing is specific and is structured by the presentation made by the community leader or designee. Time limits are placed on the length of the presentation and the question and answer format.

4. Priority Setting Method

Citizens are gathered together, listen to a presentation, participate in some discussions and question and answer processes and are then given the opportunity to vote or prioritize those elements of the

proposal felt to be most useful. The voting / prioritizing process is exciting for the citizens but must be carefully controlled by the community leader.

Each of these models has different purposes and objectives, announcement procedures, setting requirements, guidelines and strengths and weaknesses. What follows is a review of these elements for each of the public hearing models.

Open Forum Format

Purposes

The open format public hearing:

1. provides a mechanism for community leaders to hear the views of citizens on a previously identified topic
2. provides a method for citizens to express their views regarding the key topic of the hearing
3. underscores the premise that citizens should inform community decision makers of points or issues that are grass roots in nature
4. an opportunity for citizens to hear the thinking of others regarding the topic of the hearing
5. an opportunity for citizens to hear the thinking of the community leaders as they work through the decision making process

Announcement Procedures

It is critical that the citizens be informed that the public hearing is seeking citizen input on a specific topic. The typical citizen invitation format is a newspaper based announcement that should have the following types of key words:

- we want your input
- the purpose of the public hearing is to receive comments
- the meeting is to receive input
- the meeting is being conducted to obtain input
- the department is soliciting input on...
- an opportunity for public input will be provided

Setting Requirements

Open format based public hearings require the following setting and facility arrangements:

1. a location that is public, accessible and easily recognized in the community
2. a large open room or auditorium where citizens may be seated
3. a table or platform area for the community leaders to be seated at
4. a microphone or podium where the citizens may stand to deliver their views
5. the amount of space needed is not always known. Too small an area is more of a concern than too large an area
6. a method of recording the comments (video, audio, hand recorded, etc) should be arranged
7. fire codes and safety space should be known and controlled

Guidelines

Rules for the public hearing must be established in advance, announced at the beginning of the hearing and then followed. The following may be helpful for the open format hearing:

1. each person wishing to speak must do so at the microphone and must state their name and residence (or city, or area within the city)
2. those individuals speaking that represent themselves are allowed 3 minutes (or some length of specified time)
3. those individuals speaking that represent a group are allowed 5 minutes (or some length of specified time usually longer than the individual)
4. an individual may only speak once until all others desiring to speak have had an opportunity to do so
5. an individual may speak a second time only if that individual is providing new information
6. no arguments, debates, or rebuttals should override public input or courtesy
7. a specific ending time for the public hearing should be established and announced before the start of the public hearing
8. written reports on behalf of individuals or groups not in attendance will be read into the minutes of the meeting

Strengths and Weaknesses

The open hearing format offers certain strengths and concerns. The strengths include:

1. quick method of receiving input
2. low cost to sponsor
3. simple set up requirements
4. easily conducted and controlled
5. fair and open to public

Some concerns include:

1. not all citizens will be comfortable speaking in front of other citizens
2. no control over quality of input
3. professional lobbyist may intimidate an average citizen by the input process
4. views shared may not be typical of the majority of citizens
5. views shared may not be accurate of the truth

Discussion Focused Model

Purposes

The purpose of the discussion based format is:

1. to provide an opportunity for community leaders to listen to the deep thinking of citizens concerning a specific topic
2. to provide citizens an opportunity to be able to express at some length and in some depth their views and feelings regarding a specific topic
3. to provide a time for exchange of thoughts between community leaders and citizens, and between citizens
4. to provide an opportunity to confirm the logic of a proposed decision or to alter the thinking by the exposure to more lengthy and detailed conversation.

Announcement Procedures

The discussion based model generally uses two types of announcements to involve citizens. The first type is the newspaper announcement and the following key words are helpful for the citizens to understand their role:

- materials will be presented and discussed at the public meeting
- the agenda includes a discussion of the proposed...
- a public open house and round table discussion will be held
- to discuss the...
- exhibits will be viewed and discussed with project staff

At discussion based public hearings, it may be necessary to announce something like the following:

- participants are required to register in advance if they desire to participate in the discussion. To register in advance call...

Invitation may also be sent to key citizens asking that they come prepared to discuss the topic of the public hearing. In this way citizens have been given an opportunity to prepare thoughts and data for the meeting. Invitations are usually mailed to the citizens several weeks in advance of the hearing.

Setting Requirements

The setting for a discussion based hearing usually requires the following specifics:

1. a public location that is accessible and available for use
2. a location that provides sufficient space for small to large sized discussion groups
3. tables and chairs for the citizens and community leaders to sit at
4. displays, overheads, and paper documents may need to be provided for the detailed discussion
5. there are two types of discussion formats: large number and small number. The large number format requires that several table and chair discussion areas be arranged

One alternative is to divide the main question or proposal into smaller parts. Each of the smaller groups is assigned a specific topic to discuss. When the small groups combine into the large group each small group presents their thoughts on that part of the proposal. The large group then blends all of the work together.

Guidelines

The following guidelines may be helpful for the small sized discussion public hearing:

1. the citizens are welcomed, and their assignment to feel free to discuss, debate, and ask questions is explained
2. the community leader presents the information such as maps, diagrams, proposals, policies, etc (these may be stationed on walls or placed on the table used for the discussion)
3. the public responds to the presentation by giving input. This usually involves clarification, questions / answers, discussions and perhaps debate over the proposal
4. the community leader responds, clarifies and answers questions. The intent is for the community leaders to clarify their understanding of the discussion
5. the public then confirms the accuracy of the clarification and adds any additional thoughts
6. the method is followed until each element or component of the proposal has been discussed

The following guidelines may be helpful for the large sized discussion public hearing:

1. all of the citizens meet as a large group and listen to the community leader explain the concept to be discussed
2. general questions are answered from the citizens but specific questions are deferred until the small group sessions
3. the citizens are divided into smaller sized work groups and move to table and chairs spread out, giving appropriate space for small group discussions
4. the smaller groups (either with a community leader / facilitator, or not) discuss and debate the specific proposal
5. the small groups then list their thoughts and ideas on large sized paper with dark colored markers that have been provided
6. the small groups reconvene into the large group and the community leader invites the citizens to present their thoughts that have been listed on their large sized paper
7. the thoughts of each of the smaller groups are blended together and all ideas that the larger group feels are reasonable are listed as the final thoughts

Strengths and Weaknesses

The discussion based public hearing has several strengths. They are:

1. the discussion format provides an opportunity to have thoughts clarified and debated. This usually leads to more supported and thoughtful results
2. the topics can be controlled and the citizens are instructed to only discuss the topic at hand. In this way concrete and specific information is presented
3. the results are usually realistic and confirmed by the citizens
4. many perspectives, thoughts and levels of depth are applied to the proposal under discussion

There are a few concerns that emerge when using the discussion format. They are:

1. the main idea of the proposal can be rejected at the start of the discussion if the citizens do not believe the idea is worth the time to discuss or debate. This leaves the public hearing with little to do.
2. it is possible that citizens may want to change the focus of the discussion and leave the proposal topic. The discussion may deteriorate into a time of complaining
3. the discussion and recommendation of the citizens may not be realistic and based on assumptions that are not authentic
4. it is possible to lose control of the smaller sub groups and they can get off of task. When it is time to blend small group discussion into the larger group their contribution is not helpful

All of these concerns can be resolved with good group facilitation.

Presentation Based Approach

Purposes

The presentation based public hearing:

1. provides an opportunity for pre-meeting prepared information (maps, designs, results of a report, proposed policies, etc) to be presented to the public
2. provides a method for citizens to be informed of the material prepared to date
3. is a method for citizens to ask specific questions and to receive specific answers

4. an opportunity for citizens to make suggestions regarding the pre-meeting prepared material
5. provides an opportunity for information exchange seeking what level of depth the citizen desires

Announcement Procedures

It is necessary that the citizens be informed that the public hearing is presentation based and will provide an opportunity for questions and answers. The typical citizen invitation format is a newspaper based announcement that should have the following types of key words:

- a presentation of the proposed project will be made
- to review and comment on the draft report
- citizens are invited to learn about...
- citizens may review the...documents at the hearing
- a presentation of initial project findings
- the purpose of the hearing is to introduce the citizens to...
- a presentation and question and answer session regarding...

Setting Requirements

The presentation based public hearings require certain prearranged setting and facility requirements:

1. a location that is public, accessible and easily recognized in the community
2. an area sufficient for the display of presentation materials such as maps, diagrams, enlarged printed posters, etc
3. open area where citizens may sit or stand in front of the presentation materials (there may be several presentation points with various alternatives)
4. an area in front of the presentation materials sufficient for the presenter to stand and communicate specifics
5. a microphone for the presenter and/or large screen if the presentation is PowerPoint based
6. the amount of space needed is not always known but larger space is generally needed to accommodate roaming if several display areas are present
7. a method of recording questions, answers and comments should be arranged
8. fire codes, safety space and presentation support resources (bulbs, extension cords, etc) should be known and controlled

Guidelines

Only a few suggestions are needed to successfully conduct a presentation based public hearing. The following may be helpful:

1. the pre-meeting presentation materials must be prepared
2. the presentation materials should be “tested” for understandability and visual display
3. pre-site visits of the public hearing location is helpful to assure location of the presentation materials
4. a starting time (if one presentation is to be made) or open house drop-in timeframe (7pm – 8:30pm) must be announced
5. presentation notes should be prepared and rehearsed
6. anticipated questions should be projected and appropriate answers prepared
7. introductory comments should be made (to the group if a specific start time is made, or to individuals if open house drop-in model is used)
8. questions should be encouraged and concerns recorded if the answer to the question is not sufficient for the citizen
9. usually a small packet is provided of the presentation materials for the citizens to take with them

Strengths and Weaknesses

The presentation based open house offers certain strengths and concerns. The strengths include:

1. quick method of receiving input
2. generally simple set up, though based on the presentation materials more elaborate staging may be necessary
3. citizens find reacting to a proposed plan is interesting and it usually evokes specific comments
4. with sufficient support personnel, it is easily conducted and controlled
5. provides open method for citizens to have questions answered
6. accuracy of information shared can be controlled

Some concerns include:

1. the time to prepare presentation materials is lengthy
2. the cost to prepare materials and acquire display equipment may be high
3. views shared by citizens may not be typical of the majority of citizens
4. presentation based public hearings are generally more specific in topic and hence fewer citizens tend to participate
5. time can be over-consumed by one citizen asking a multitude of questions while other citizens are not attended to

Priority Setting Method

Purposes

The voting or priority setting public hearing has several purposes. They are:

1. to provide an opportunity for the community decision makers to see how citizens prioritize various components of a proposal
2. to provide citizens with the opportunity to move beyond discussion of a proposal and to prioritize or to give a marked value to elements of the proposal
3. this is the maximum participation process for citizens and therefore requires planning on the part of community leaders and committed involvement on the part of the citizens. Therefore, the process intends to provide citizens with an opportunity for intense involvement
4. to provide an opportunity for citizens to listen to others but to form an individual conclusion blending the thoughts of others with personal views

Announcement Procedures

The priority setting public hearing can be announced to the general public but this can cause significant control issues. It is more effective to invite specific citizens who are willing to commit time and intense thought. The following key words may be helpful in an announcement:

- the purpose of this meeting is to set priorities
- the purpose of this meeting is to confirm priorities
- invited to attend an open house and assist project team in identifying priorities
- to discuss the priority of...
- at the meeting a ballot will be provided

Setting Requirements

The priority setting public hearing requires certain setting requirements. They include:

1. a public location that is accessible and available for use
2. a location that provides sufficient space for discussion and movement
3. paper sheets with priority setting or voting options or large sized paper with statements that citizens can read and place stickers on
4. an area where citizens may mingle, discuss and then place a sticker or some other indicator of preference

Guidelines

The following guidelines are helpful for the successful priority setting public hearing:

1. the citizens must be taught how to participate in this type of public input meeting
2. the community leader presents materials and allows a question and answer session
3. the citizens participate in an open discussion of the values of different elements of the proposal
4. each citizen is given a ballot or sheet of paper where different components of the proposal are identified. For example: Place a 1 by the action that you feel is most important for the community to take
5. many voting models are available:
 - a ballot sheet, or
 - each citizen is given ten circle stickers. They may place any number of stickers from 1-10 on the item that they feel is most important. The items are printed on large sized paper and placed around the room
 - it is important to avoid the concept that a vote represents the expenditure of money (that is each sticker is thematically worth \$100 and you may append the \$1,000 any way you desire). Citizens may believe that they are actually setting budget priorities
6. at a certain point in time, the citizens are able to privately vote or set priorities
7. occasionally, priority setting is completed by the citizens as a group. This requires a trained facilitator to work the citizen through compromise moments. When citizens are able to set priorities by themselves, they are the sole interpreter of values
8. it is necessary to explain to citizens how the priority setting votes will be used. It is important that they feel that the process has had meaning

Strengths and Weaknesses

The priority setting public hearing has several strengths. They include:

1. the format provides a way for community leaders to receive specific priority indication from citizens about key elements of the proposal
2. citizens are provided an opportunity to express a vote or priority ranking of specific items of a proposal
3. citizens may listen to the thoughts of community leaders and other citizens but form an individual response
4. the process requires a great deal of mental thought on the part of the citizens and usually they feel their contribution has been taken seriously

The concerns of this approach include:

1. significant pre-meeting preparation is required. Materials must be prepared, anticipated questions prepared for, and a specific voting method selected
2. manipulation of the voting process may occur if control is not present
3. significant pressure may be placed on selected citizens by other citizens only because of the voting element of the process
4. it is not uncommon for citizens to believe that those items voted higher priority will actually happen or occur first. The purpose of the approach is to gather priority. Other factors may interfere with the carrying out of the proposal

RESULTS

Each of these different models yield different results. The following is an overview of these possibilities:

1. Open Forum Format

The open forum format will leave the community leader with perhaps a multitude of views. Clear trends may emerge or no trends at all may be the end result. The community leader must digest the quality of the input as well as the quantity.

The community leader should:

1. receive the input
2. not respond to comments
3. give impartial reaction to the input
4. not engage in discussion, debate or justification
5. ask clarifying questions if necessary

2. Discussion Focused Model

The results of the discussion based public hearing come in the form of extensive notes taken by the community leader. The community leader should:

1. make arrangements for note takers to be present and active during large group or small group discussions
2. small group discussion notes may be taken by a citizen
3. large sized paper used by the small groups to relay their feelings to the large group should be retained by the community leader for reference
4. blended results from the small groups and agreed upon by the larger group should be retained by the community leader
5. the community leader should feel free to participate in the discussion elements of this type of public hearing
6. some community leaders have acted as group facilitators only and not participated in the discussion phases

3. Presentation Based Approach

The presentation based open house will have provided the citizen with information and an opportunity to have questions answered. The community leader will have had the opportunity to test the advisability of the proposed project and to have been able to have fielded questions that may alter or provoke additional thinking.

The community leader should:

1. field questions and provide answers
2. record and assess concerns
3. attempt to explain logic of the proposed plan
4. ask clarifying questions of citizens

4. Priority Setting Method

The results of the priority setting / voting method are usually easily tabulated. The community leader should:

1. collect the ballots or the large sized paper where the votes have been cast
2. some form of quantity and quality measures should be tabulated. For example, 82% of the citizens feel that ... is the highest priority. Their reasoning is ...
3. the thinking behind the vote is often as important as the actual vote
4. the decision maker should remember that the point of this process is to solicit trends rather than mandates

SUMMARY

Little has been written in the professional literature about conducting public hearings and minimal research has been collected on this important planning process. Generally, the professional learns how to conduct public hearings by observing professional colleagues and mirroring what they see. This can either lead to positive or negative outcomes based on the expertise of the mentor.

It is hoped that the forgoing will be helpful in assisting agency personnel in a more useful public input gathering process.