

The Executive

The Focus Group Process In Parks & Recreation Planning



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Introduction

Capturing public input is an essential element of appropriate parks and recreation planning. The public can provide important data that assists the administrator in a multitude of helpful ways. Citizen generated information can give clear response when used as an evaluation device. Important data regarding program strengths and weaknesses, facility uses and accommodations as well as the value of personnel services provided to the user can be obtained. Input can also describe the user and build helpful profile information regarding the characteristics of the typical user of the program and hence the non-user as well. Coupled with this information, the administrator can develop more effective marketing strategies that work off of the non-user and users characteristics and experiences. Public involvement techniques can help define user wants, desires, needs, priorities, participation and satisfaction levels. Any or all of that type of data is informative for planning purposes. If the assessment device is constructed as such, vital geographic and demographic information can be obtained. When superimposed over other information, such as new program desires, very specific management decisions can be made. Good management strategy and policy development is based on accurate and current public input and those policies that clearly reflect the needs of citizens coupled with agency resources are most likely to have meaning. Most planning studies use citizen involvement as a critical element in designing for the future. After all, the planning should mirror the community context for which the plan is designed. Public involvement can come through a variety of different methods (telephone calls, mail-out surveys, on-site questionnaires, door-to-door interviews, public hearings, etc.), each with its particular set of strengths and weaknesses. The following table attempts to detail some of the strengths and weaknesses of these more traditional approaches:

Method: Description: Strengths: Weaknesses:	Telephone Survey Randomly selected residents are interviewed over the phone Random selection of citizens, fast method of data collection Expensive, limited amount of information retrievable, large non-response potential
Method: Description: Strengths: Weaknesses:	Mail-Out Survey Surveys sent in mail to randomly selected citizens Random selection of residents, in-depth information collected Expensive, large non-return, slow method of data collection
Method: Description: Strengths: Weaknesses:	On-Site Questionnaire Questionnaire available at program sites for users to respond to Inexpensive, fast method of data collection, in-depth information possible Generally obtains users feelings only

Method: Description:	Door-to-Door Interview Trained interviewers collect information from residents by tracking through selected neighborhoods
Strengths:	Neighborhood specific, in-depth information collected
Weaknesses:	Expensive, slow method of data collection
Method: Description:	Public Hearing Citizens attend an open meeting to express their feelings
Strengths:	Inexpensive, provides two-way dialogue, fast method of data collection
Weaknesses:	Not all citizens participate, may not have collectable and usable information

Reemerging as a popular approach is the PUBLIC FOCUS GROUP method. This process consists of asking highly-committed and well-informed citizens to spend an evening discussing, debating and then prioritizing pre-determined parks and recreation issues that are deemed critical by the parks and recreation professional staff. These issues might be generated by the professional staff, as would questions used for the other survey and questionnaire methods or in conjunction with a citizen advisory committee or a technical assistance team. Each issue is placed on a 4" x 6" index card and as the citizens discuss, with the help of a trained facilitator, the various merits of importance of each issue, the cards are continually readjusted on a table or bulletin board in a line-of-priority order until the citizens are satisfied that the issues are in the most appropriate priority order. This process allows large groups of citizens to focus on highly complex issues in a short period of time under a controlled environment with a high degree of citizen involvement and commitment.

The public focus group is an excellent blend between the traditional public hearing and the common survey approach to collecting citizen input. The public hearing allows citizens to express views in an open forum which provides important perspectives for planners to hear, however, at times public hearings get derailed on issues brought up by the strongest and loudest voices in the meeting and it is very possible that the information brought forward is so varied and individual that it can not be tabulated and no clear trends emerge. The survey is used to control the specific information that the planners need (by asking very specific questions on the survey form) and hence tabulation and trends, if any, clearly emerge. In fact, if demographics and geographic information is asked, then the trend can become very neighborhood or citizen specific. However, the survey is usually filled out by citizens in isolation (in their home with little or no interaction with others) and the very important hearing and sharing of divergent views is missed. The public focus group brings together both needed elements - control by dealing with pre-determined issues (the same as the survey questions) and active dialogue by encouraging citizens to discuss and debate those issues from their unique vantage points.

Previous research has illustrated the successful use of the focus group method in which a wide array of issues and groups have been studied. Specifically such concepts as: market research, nutrition, nursing, community colleges, TV commercials, supermarkets, pharmacy education, employee relations, public relations, high-risk families and libraries have found the focus group process helpful.

Public Focus Group Model

This method has its own set of strengths and weaknesses but depending on the circumstances of the community, the citizens, local issues, time frames and such, it can be a viable mechanism for helpful public input. Public focus groups generally are inexpensive (usually the cost of a public meeting space and a trained facilitator), allow for a high level of control of public input, that is, the citizens are focused on the pre-determined issues, not personal or hidden agendas that sometimes emerge during public hearing styled meetings and elicit usable, detailed and comparable information such as the relative importance of one community issue to another. Additionally, these types of meetings help to inform citizens of issues, share information that might make for a more well informed citizenry, and can help to identify new issues of concern not previously known by the professional staff. Experience has also shown that people involved in focus groups feel better about citizen involvement, more committed to the decision made and become active voices for the implementation of the decision making process. However, public focus groups can not entertain all issues of concern and so some citizens might feel frustrated if an item of specific concern to them was not dealt with. Related to this might be a citizen who attempts to introduce a new issue that the citizen feels is of equal or greater importance than the predetermined issues brought before the group. Also, by the very nature of the citizen discussion, debate and prioritization process of the meetings, some citizens dominate the conversation, attempt to overly influence others in the group and might even frustrate the purpose of the focus group. It should be recognized that not all parks and recreation issues important to citizens can be included in the focus groups and so opportunities need to exist after the meetings for citizens to discuss with professional staff these additional and different issues. One of the key components to making the process work is an experienced facilitator who can control the direction of the meeting and handle unrelated interests.

Method

This monograph suggests how the focus group model has been used:

Public Focus Group Steps	
1	Identify, discuss and word the predetermined issues.
2	Do not exceed 15-20 issues.
3	Set public focus group meeting schedule(s).
4	Invite citizen representatives to the meetings.
5	Facilitate the public focus group session(s).
6	Analyze and share the information.

FIRST, a team of professional staff members, a citizen advisory committee and a technical team that assisted in the identification, discussion and wording of the parks and recreation issues was

established. The professional staff, of course, brought their professional expertise, their views from the day to day operation of the program and services and a long term career sense of what they perceived to be the critical issues for the future. The citizen advisory group represented the citizens at large and were selected to represent the citizenry geographically and demographically and provided the perspective of users and potential users of the current and proposed programs and services. The technical team was a helpful group of professionally trained public service employees from sister agencies and those organizations that might be impacted in some way by the future actions of the agencies sponsoring the focus groups. These team members generally brought professional expertise coupled with experiences from interaction with their constituency that was of assistance to this process. As these groups met, their purpose was to identify all the parks and recreation issues that seemed important to the future of that community, the issues were discussed until the groups felt comfortable that they had sorted out the most critical issues and then worked to word the issues in such a way that citizens could understand, debate and eventually prioritize those issues. The issues will and should be different for each community. The following list was established for the large urban and rural county in the Southwest in which general county wide needs were the interest and a second set of issues were created for a small city considering parks and recreation issues of an old airport area.

County Public Focus Group Issues

- ☐ County needs to develop more multi-purpose field/complexes for soccer, baseball/softball, football, etc.
- ☐ County needs to develop a large family use park/special events park for use by large functions for rental on a fee basis.
- ☐ County needs to develop more passive recreation areas/facilities (outdoor game tables, walking trails, shelters, etc.).
- ☐ County needs to develop more neighborhood parks within walking distance for neighborhood use.
- ☐ County needs to develop an area golf course.
- ☐ County needs to develop more gymnasiums for year-round recreation in under served areas.
- ☐ County needs to provide before and after school extended care recreation programs.
- ☐ County needs to develop more regional/family indoor aquatic facilities in under served areas.
- ☐ County needs to develop a regional indoor complex (tennis, basketball, roller hockey, dancing, etc.).
- ☐ County needs to develop appropriate trails for walking, biking, bicycles, mountain bikes, horses, etc.
- ☐ County needs to acquire land for open space.
- ☐ County needs to acquire land for future park development.
- ☐ County needs to develop more programs/facilities (senior centers) for the senior citizens.
- ☐ County needs to renovate and/or complete development of existing facilities.
- ☐ County needs to develop an outdoor equestrian facility.
- ☐ County needs to sponsor supervised late night recreation activities at specifically designated

- parks.
- ☐ County needs to provide recreation programs for teenagers.
 - ☐ County needs to improve maintenance at existing facilities.
 - ☐ County needs to develop programs for people with physical and mental disabilities.

Old Airport Focus Group Issues

The old airport site should:

- ☐ provide for multiple soccer fields
- ☐ provide for a teen center
- ☐ provide for an indoor multi-purpose community center
- ☐ be used as open space
- ☐ provide for user parking on-site, easy access, and lights
- ☐ be divested and developed for non-recreational uses
- ☐ provide for a trail system for hiking, biking and equestrian uses
- ☐ provide for softball, baseball and football fields
- ☐ be designed for separate recreation use areas and groups
- ☐ provide for large special group event uses, i.e. company picnics or amphitheater
- ☐ provide for roller-blading, street hockey, skate boarding
- ☐ have easy transportation access from across the city for cars and bikes
- ☐ provide for passive areas such as picnicking
- ☐ have high maintenance standards for the various uses
- ☐ require a small fee from users to help support the area
- ☐ provide for future co-use with the existing golf course
- ☐ provide for future family aquatic activities

SECOND, the teams that developed the issues worked hard to limit the final critical issue list to 15-20 items. Experience has taught that citizens are not able to concentrate on any more issues than this at one meeting and that besides the mental fatigue that sets in, generally, citizens are either unable or unwilling to spend more than two hours in an evening at a public focus meeting. The number of issues dealt with and time frame allotted to discuss and prioritize effect the quality of both the process and the end results. Additionally, there may be great variations in the number of citizens who attend and participate in a focus group meeting and extending beyond 20 issues usually excludes a large number of citizens from effectively participating.

THIRD, a series of public focus group meetings that were convenient for citizens to attend was set up. Of course, the time of day, location site of the meetings, appropriate announcement of the meetings and avoiding conflict with other community events were important considerations. Most communities have found an evening time frame has the greatest likelihood of convenience for citizens and holding the meeting at public facilities avoids cost to the community, generally provides easy access for citizens and are geographically approximate and recognizable structures to the citizenry. The specific dates selected were advertised well in advance so that individual citizens and

citizen groups could make necessary arrangements to attend and help to avoid known community calendar conflicts. For the large county efforts, meetings were held once a week over a six-week period. For the small city efforts, meetings were held on three consecutive days (two per night for two nights and four on a Saturday).

FOURTH, a concerted effort was made to announce, invite and assure that good attendance from citizens or their representative occurred. Public focus groups are based more on the quality of the participation in the process than the number of citizens who choose to participate, nevertheless, great effort should be made to activate as many citizens as possible. For those focus group meetings held in different geographic regions of the community, it was helpful to use neighborhood associations, public newsletters and announcements from special interest groups that serve or are in that neighborhood region to inform the citizens. Using the standard public notice system (radio and newspapers) was also helpful, but the goal was to assure that □highly-committed and well-informed□ citizens attended and actively participated in this process. For the group-specific focus group, phone calls and written invitations were used. It is not uncommon for sponsors of public focus groups to invite specific individuals, representatives of different community organizations, art alliances and the like to send representatives to participate in the groups, which was done for this study. Generally, a typical public focus group will have a combination of interested citizens as well as representatives from specific community groups that join together to attempt to melt a common priority view of the issues. As a caution, the professional staff should work to keep special interest views balanced through the invitation process.

FIFTH, and most difficult was the proper facilitation of the public focus group sessions. It is certainly possible that one of the professional staff can conduct and facilitate the meeting however, it is not uncommon to use an outside consultant or trained communication specialist to handle the actual sessions. Depending on the issues that are developed and the political nature of the community, it may be essential that an individual with appropriate distance from the agency lead the sessions. In this study, a trained focus group facilitator lead the sessions and the following is an overview of the basic guidelines that the facilitator used:

Facilitation Guidelines	
1	Explain the public focus group concept and guidelines
2	Present the issues to all in attendance.
3	Answer specific questions about the issues.
4	Arrange citizens around tables or bulletin boards for the discussion phase.
5	Lead the citizens through the discussion phase using the index cards, then the first wave of prioritization and then the refinement phases of prioritization.
6	Maintain control of the process so that quality decisions are made.
7	Conclude the focus group and allow for new and different issues to be discussed with professional

	staff.
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The meeting started with the facilitator explaining to the participants the purpose and goals of the public focus group concept and how the process was to be conducted with that group. Most citizens found this an interesting process and emerged with a real sense of involvement in the community decision-making process. Next was a presentation of the predetermined issues to those in attendance - the use of an overhead projector with the issues on a transparency was an effective method. Answered were those questions that emerged from this general overview of issues, but the facilitator was careful not to imply value or judgment on any of the issues. The issues were presented in a no-particular-order process with equal value implied for each issue. The citizens were arranged so they could sit around a large table or bulletin board with a clear view of the issues that were printed on the index cards. The arrangement of the citizens was such that all felt equal in their vantage point and ability to participate. If a particularly large group of citizens were at a meeting (generally greater than 30) it was necessary to have multiple facilitators and then to average the different groups prioritizations together at the end of the session. The citizens were led through the initial discussion phase of the issues which usually consisted of getting the citizens to agree to a High, Medium and Low value of the issues and placing together the issue cards grouped by this value system. Then the citizens were led through the first wave of prioritization which asked them to rank the issues within the low value category and then rank the medium value category and then the high value category of issues. By physically moving the cards it was much easier for the citizens to see how that complex issue related to other complex issues. Starting with the lower priority issues first usually helps the group effort move more efficiently. The greater discussions and debates occur with the higher ranked items. This was a difficult task for citizens and usually much discussion, debate and temporary agreement of rank order emerged. This is one of the great values of the public focus group process because citizens are wrestling with the same key issues that professional staff must consider and the citizens are able to share their views, listen to new perspectives of other citizens and to alter their opinions. The citizens were led through the final refinement phase (again by physically moving the cards at the citizens request) which required that the citizens agreed on the final priority order of all issues. Again, this was a very difficult process because it required some citizens to compromise, but again, the purpose of the focus group was to help professional staff understand what the citizens valued. It was necessary when the ranking of some issues became deadlocked that those two or three issues received the same ranking value. This should generally be avoided if possible because it does not force the citizens into the critical decision making mode that is essential. However, rather than have an intense two hour citizen process break-down, it was necessary for the facilitator to suggest a common compromise. During these various decision making phases, it was important that the facilitator maintain control of the process so that high quality decisions emerge and the participating citizens feel valued. It is essential then that the facilitator provide consistent information from one group session to another so that each group operates with the same background information. Also, the facilitator should not forget that the purpose of the sessions is to assist the citizen in clarifying their feelings regarding the issues so the facilitator must be careful not to lead the citizens in what decision they should make, but just in the decision making process. Again, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to control the climate of the meeting and to

help some citizens to more effectively participate, others to participate less and to lead the focus group to its proper closure. Lastly, the facilitator concluded the meeting, helped to make sure the emotional and intellectual process was ready to end and made arrangements for citizens that had new or different issues from the predetermined ones an opportunity to discuss those with professional staff after the meeting ended.

SIXTH, it was necessary to analyze and share the information that had been gleaned from the focus group process. One of the attributes of this method was that the results were easily understood and presented and did not require any sophisticated statistical manipulation. If the community conducts one public focus group then the results consist of the rank order of issues as decided by those citizens. If several sessions are conducted, due to different geographic regions within the community or a specific set of citizens exclusively participated (such as a neighborhood association or a specific sport organization), then the results can be either from that group or a blend of several groups together.

Findings

From the issues list that was developed for the county wide study (see County Public Focus Group Issues), five different sessions were held in different geographic regions of the community (west side, east side, north side, south side and central area). The professional staff was then able (for planning purposes) to look at the priority the citizens placed on the various issues by geographic area or by averaging the rankings together to obtain a sense of what the citizens of all areas together felt was most important.

PRIORITIZATION OF ISSUES			
ISSUES	WEST	EAST	NORTH
Multipurpose	1	4	8
Trails	4	3	4
Open Space	8	1	2
Teenagers	2	5	9
Before/After	3	6	3
Future Parks	12	12	1
Aquatics	11	8	11
Senior Citizens	10	11	5
Gymnasiums	9	14	10
Indoor	5	2	17
Physical-Mental	14	16	6
Renovate	6	10	14

Late Night	13	9	7
Maintenance	7	13	12
Equestrian	17	7	13
Neighborhood Parks	15	17	16
Passive	16	15	15
Event Park	19	18	18
Golf Course	18	19	19
PRIORITIZATION OF ISSUES			
ISSUES	SOUT H	CENTRAL	COUNTY WIDE
Multipurpose	2	4	3.8
Trails	10	2	4.6
Open Space	8	7	5.2
Teenagers	5	6	5.4
Before/After	3	12	5.4
Future Parks	1	1	7.0
Aquatics	4	3	7.4
Senior Citizens	6	8	8.0
Gymnasiums	1	13	9.4
Indoor	14	14	10.4
Physical-Mental	7	11	10.8
Renovate	11	17	11.6
Late Night	17	15	12.2
Maintenance	12	18	12.4
Equestrian	16	9	12.4
Neighborhood Parks	15	5	13.6
Passive	13	10	13.8
Event Park	18	16	17.8
Golf Course	19	19	18.8

It can be noted that there were clear similarities of feeling on some issues regardless of where the

citizens resided (event park, golf course), a mixture of opinion based on geographic area on other issues (Future Parks) and great variety of interest by geographic area for certain issues (gymnasium ranked 1 by South and 14 by East), but the professional staff had available to them highly localized, neighborhood specific information as well as a more general and community wide set of priorities. From the issues list created for the small city (see Old Airport Focus Group Issues), nine different sessions were held with group specific citizens (business community, sports interests, community leaders, special interests, seniors, families, neighborhood residents and youth). The professional staff was then able to determine if particular user groups differed, if neighborhood residents had significantly different interests from the rest of the community and if programming by demographic feature such as age emerged as a trend. It is clear that a pattern of interest emerged for the airport site (soccer fields, family aquatic facilities) and the policies (high maintenance standards, small use fee) were also clarified. One of the most effective ways to share this information was to ask citizens who participated in the focus group meetings to sign-in at the start of the session indicating their name and mailing address so that the professional staff could then send back out the prioritizations from that meeting as well as a comparison of priorities from other sessions held. Of course, the great impact of the findings was for the professional staff, citizen advisory board and technical assistance team to reconvene and discuss possible explanations as to why citizens felt as they did and then to incorporate this valuable information into future planning efforts.

Implications

Public focus groups are an effective means of obtaining public input that is generally inexpensive, relatively rapid and engenders high citizen involvement and usually solid citizen commitment. Of course it is not appropriate in all communities or for all circumstances, but its use has increased in popularity primarily due to its effectiveness as a planning tool. There are a number of important implications for the practical application of this technique that highlight its value as a planning tool.

1. The public focus group method is a fast and cost effective technique to gather important citizen views. Other methods of data gathering may take many months to plan, collect and interpret the data, such is common in door to door surveys. Also, the cost to conduct focus groups is relatively lower than most other methods. The use of public meeting rooms is generally at no cost and the expense to contact specific citizens or groups to attend the focus groups is minimal. If an in-house professional is used to facilitate the meetings, then the single greatest cost, that for the facilitator, is minimized. However, even using a highly trained focus group facilitator is much less expensive than the majority of other public input methods.

2. The information that is gathered at the focus group is very usable and can be tabulated. One of the greatest concerns regarding public hearings is that the great variety of views shared by the citizens are sometimes so diverse that clear patterns are not evident. This does not occur with the focused method. Citizens are free to express opinions, debate issues, but ultimately the citizens prioritize the predetermined issues into a list of priorities that is very helpful for planners and administrators. Clear trends, if they exist, are easy to track by using this method.

3. This method allows and encourages both users and non-users as well as directly impacted citizens (such as residents proximate to a future development) or indirectly impacted groups (business community, schools, churches, etc.) to participate. By using the invitation method, high control over the number, type and interest level of the participant can be maintained. Citizens who do not traditionally choose to be involved in community decisions might find an acceptable forum when involved in this model. Experience has shown that citizens will accept an invitation to participate in an intense grassroots decision making experience, if given the opportunity.

4. The focus group method provides a wide range of applications (geographic, interest groups, user/non-user, population size, etc.) for the planner. This study has shown how this method can be successfully used for a highly populated, large geographic county area or for a small city with a moderate population within a limited boundary area.

5. The focus group also has the advantage of requiring a relatively small number of citizens to participate in order for the process to be successful. In traditional citizen input (survey, for example), a large number of citizens are required in order to make that data gathering process statistically valid. However, research has shown that focus groups work well with as few as six participants and need not exceed thirty participants. In the two studies presented here, the focus groups ranged from eight participants in a session to thirty in another session.

6. Different types of issues can be presented to citizens in the focus group model without losing any validity to the process. For example, the issues could center around policy statements or future resources desired by the residents or a combination of different types of issues. It is helpful, however, to separate issues if at all possible. It should be noted in the findings from the small city focus group (see next table) that a combination of issues, policy statements and future resources were presented at the same time. It is possible that if the policy issues were separated from resource issues, slightly different priorities could have emerged. (See Old Airport Focus Group Issues)

7. The focus group method has great strength in that the issues presented to citizens can be very specific to a certain neighborhood area or issues can be selected that are more general to the community as a whole. If a particular group within the community or a specific geographic region has issues that need to be decided, then the focus group provides an excellent mechanism. Additionally, the model works well as the centerpiece of data gathering for the total community. The process does not change, only the specific or general nature of the issue statements.

8. Experience and research has taught that this process, besides a method for collecting data, also stimulates the citizen to commitment to the decisions that are made by the group. After a group of citizens have discussed, debated and prioritized the issues, they are very committed to the importance of the relative position of those issues and in many cases can be an advocacy group for the implementation of those decisions. It is wise to use the successful focus groups as communicators to the community decision makers of how strongly those citizens now feel about the issues. Now, it is possible that the citizen could view certain future parks and recreation efforts as

of minimal importance and communicate non-support for certain actions. But again, the purpose of the focus groups are not to validate professional staff views, but to help instruct professional staff on the importance that citizens have for certain issues.

9. Lastly, the focus group is accurate. Both research and experience that has specifically monitored the relationship of this method of citizen input to the more traditional methods have shown a basic similarity of findings. The focus group method, as a small but intense group approach, yields the same kind of results as the large, more community-wide methods.

LOCAL CITIZENS	BUSINESS GROUP	SPORTS INTERESTS
2	6	2
11	17	8
12	12	7
16	11	16
3	8	9
17	15	17
7	16	6
6	6	4
13	14	11
14	13	14
10	4	5
5	9	10
8	3	15
1	1	1
8	5	13
15	10	12
4	2	3

COMMUNITY LEADERS	SPECIAL INTEREST	SENIORS
4	5	5
12	12	8
13	14	8
14	10	15
2	2	2
16	16	17
4	6	10
4	6	5
4	11	7
4	15	15
4	12	10
2	2	2
4	6	15
1	1	1
17	4	2
15	17	16
4	9	10

FAMILIES	NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENTS	YOUTH
5	1	10
8	2	8
8	11	3
16	12	17
3	3	13
17	17	16
10	5	1
5	7	11
10	11	12
10	14	8
15	13	1
3	3	15
10	5	5
1	9	9
2	14	6
14	10	14
7	7	3

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