



## **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

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**MUNICIPAL  
IMPLEMENTATION  
TOOL #22**

**NOVEMBER 2011**

## Public Participation and the Planning Process

Public participation and civic engagement have become an increasingly important part of the planning process. Successfully engaging the public in planning and decision-making can create a beneficial environment that builds consensus, reaches a collective community goal, and even lessens friction among opposing factions. In order to implement any plan, there needs to be cooperative and coordinated action among the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Through a constructive dialogue, decision-makers, planners, and the public can shape a vision for a community, a county, or a region.

This brochure is one of a series of Municipal Implementation Tools (MITs) developed by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) to introduce local officials and citizens to planning techniques that may be useful in their communities. This MIT offers an overview of public engagement and participation and suggests strategies and techniques to engage the public in the planning process.

Effective public participation is not only based on sound planning practice, but also on federal mandates, such as:

- **Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964**, which states that “no person in the United States, shall, on the grounds of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”
- **Executive Order 12898: Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations:** Environmental Justice (EJ) is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, income, or education level, in the planning process. EJ also requires that there be an equitable distribution of benefits and burdens of a project or program across a community.
- **Executive Order 13166: Improving Access for Persons with Limited English Proficiency.**
- **The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990.**

### What is Public Participation?

Public participation is the process by which interested and affected individuals, organizations, government agencies, and other entities are engaged and included in the decision-making process. Public participation requires timely information dissemination, which refers to the availability of relevant information on programs and projects so stakeholders can make informed decisions. Engaging stakeholders through participation also includes information exchange among stakeholders, educational opportunities, and, most importantly, a chance for communities and local groups to contribute to a project's scope, implementation, and evaluation. Developing strategies for incorporating stakeholder participation throughout a project's cycle is necessary in projects that affect the incomes, livelihoods, or lifestyles of local groups, especially disadvantaged populations.

### Why Public Participation?

Public participation is a dynamic and ongoing process that is important to meeting the varied needs of local residents and other individuals who may be impacted by the plan. Incorporating input and ideas from a variety of entities leads to better decision-making, and can also identify potential unknown issues or obstacles to a project's implementation. Most importantly, public participation builds consensus and trust, enhances a community's sense of ownership of a project, and facilitates citizen buy-in, which leads to a more successful project or program, and can result in a smoother planning and implementation process. Public participation and public review of planning projects can also be a mandate as part of National Environmental Policy Act review, or anytime federal funding is utilized for a project.



## Designing a Public Participation Plan

A public participation program should follow a systematic process and take into consideration the issues being addressed, the size of the project, resources, and time. Appropriate techniques are then aimed at reaching relevant groups. Participation efforts can be flexible to accommodate different public involvement challenges and evolve to address issues that arise during the planning process. However, it is fundamental to develop guidelines, follow a series of steps, and document the process along the way.

### 1. Identify Relevant Stakeholders

Stakeholders are the groups or individuals impacted by a proposed project or plan and can include those who perceive that they are to be affected. Stakeholders have a specific interest in a project's development and its impact on the community. Stakeholders may be businesses, land owners, government agencies, neighborhood organizations, civic groups, youth, members of the general public, etc. Effective participation includes all types of stakeholders and outreach to a variety of groups, organizations, and individuals is particularly important.

### 2. Set Goals and Objectives

Municipalities should define their intentions for public participation and how it will be used to guide planning and project implementation. More so, the public must know what outcomes are expected from the process. A set timeline should identify which tasks require public participation and to what degree. In general, public participation should be early, often, and ongoing, so stakeholders are participating throughout a project's entire planning process.

### 3. Select Appropriate Participation Techniques

Appropriate participation technique varies based on the stage of the planning process, the audience, and available resources. Effective public participation often involves multiple participation techniques to achieve its end goals.



### 4. Evaluate

Progress should be evaluated in relation to set objectives and milestones, and it is important to continually assess the public participation plan during

the process. If a specific technique was not successful, a different technique may be used for future outreach. The public participation process should be well documented, specifically noting the parties involved, input gathered, and the degree to which the public involvement effort reached community members.

## Public Participation Techniques

Municipalities can employ a variety of effective public participation techniques to gather input and involvement on a project. The selected participation methods should match the project or issue at hand and available resources, as well as what type of information and input is to be gained from the process. Participation techniques serve to:

- Provide information to the public;
- Solicit information and opinions;
- Solve problems cooperatively;
- Conduct committee business; and
- Satisfy legal requirements.

Most importantly, public participation must be functional for the planning process, while also being meaningful to the public. Described below are a variety of commonly used public participation techniques. Often, the best choice for a community involves a combination of several different methods, as there is no “one size fits all” approach to public participation. As different methods accomplish different goals, a multilayered approach to public participation will garner the best results.

### Steering Committee:

A steering committee helps guide the planning process. The committee provides an opportunity to receive detailed feedback from different parties.



Steering committees are usually comprised of 10 to 15 individuals, and may include local authorities, members of the business community, key nonprofit agencies, or citizen groups. The role of the steering committee is to provide feedback, review data and preliminary findings, advise outside consultants, and shape the overall planning and outreach process. The

steering committee ensures project completion and can serve as a political ‘barometer’ on recommendations.

Creating a steering committee can also serve as a good opportunity to bring together all of the entities that must be coordinated in order to make a project successful. Members may be nominated or appointed. Steering committees often meet monthly or quarterly, depending on the project.

### Opinion Surveys:

Opinion surveys are used to systematically collect data on the viewpoints of a group. The sample of individuals given the survey should be chosen carefully to represent the appropriate target population. Survey questions should be brief, simple, and jargon-free to facilitate understanding. Opinion surveys can be administered by telephone, mail, website/email, or in person. They can target a select sample of participants or be made available to all members of the public.



### Stakeholder Interviews:

Stakeholder interviews provide detailed information from key community members regarding an issue or a project and may be especially effective at the beginning of the planning process. Interviews should start with a key set of questions, but interviewers should feel comfortable varying the question order or adding more content as appropriate. It is good practice to type up the results of an interview and disseminate them to the interviewee to ensure that all information and opinions were interpreted and documented correctly.

### Focus Groups:

Focus groups are used to gauge public opinion. They consist of a small number of individuals who are responsible for identifying information, concerns, values, beliefs, or challenges related to a particular issue or project. Participants may be selected at random or based on their knowledge of a particular subject. Focus groups require a skilled facilitator to guide the process, as well as vocal participants. A successful focus group will include a carefully crafted agenda and an emphasis on gathering perspectives through conversation and interaction. At the conclusion of the focus group, major points of agreement and divergence are identified.





## Public Meetings & Events

Often, the best way to obtain community participation is through hosting a public event. Public events or meetings can take a variety of forms, depending on the type of project, the type of information that the municipality wishes to gather, where a municipality is in the planning process, and available resources. Public events can range from open houses to more interactive workshops that seek to build community consensus. Ideally, a series of events should be planned at the start of the process, during the process, and at the end of the process.

Below is a list of public meeting types:

### Public Hearings:

Public hearings are formal meetings held by a governmental body during which the public may provide comment or testimony. Public hearings are held largely to satisfy legal provisions. They include a formal presentation by the hosting body and then allow time for recorded public comment.

### Open Houses:

Open houses are informal gathering opportunities where public facilities (for example, a room in a town hall) are opened up to the public to share progress on a particular project or process. They allow members of the public to drop in at their convenience and stay as long as they wish. Open houses usually include some sort of visual display, such as images, maps, charts, and text in board display or pinned up around a room, which visitors can observe at their own pace. They can also include a brief informational handout, such as a brochure or fact sheet, which the public can use at the open house and take home. Staff should be present to answer questions and build rapport with attendees. Open houses are particularly effective as a “kick-off” event to present a project and to gather initial stakeholder input. Sign-up sheets for information about further meetings and updates allow open-house attendees to become further involved as the planning process progresses. Comment sheets may also be made available at an open house.

### Interactive Meetings/Workshops:

Often, the most effective public participation events are those that involve interactive methods for gathering public opinion. Interactive meetings serve to both educate the public about a particular project or process, as well as build consensus among community members. Many of the techniques described below work most effectively in a smaller group setting (less than 12 people). Larger meetings may be broken up into smaller groups, either in separate rooms or in different corners of the same room, to complete the discussion exercise and then reconvene at the end of the meeting to share each group's findings. All of these techniques will require a skilled facilitator to



explain and guide the process. Results of the session should be recorded and may require a separate staff member to do so.

### Brainstorming:

Brainstorming can be highly effective in moving participants out of conflict and toward consensus. Brainstorming sessions are attractive because they yield creative solutions, given that individuals are encouraged to bring up all ideas; they also allow for better definition and understanding of the problem as alternatives appear in a new or different light. The brainstorming process is democratic and all participants are given an opportunity to suggest ideas.

Sessions are most effective if participants are broken into groups of six to 10. A designated recorder should write down ideas on paper or an easel. Colored adhesive dots can be used to prioritize ideas, with each participant given a certain number of dots that he or she can allocate to different ideas as he or she sees fit, making for an effective visual display.

### Charrettes:

Charrettes are creative interactive events that bring together large groups of people to find a solution to a problem. A charrette is an open process that includes all stakeholders from various interest groups. It is often a multiday event and results in a plan that is able to be implemented and agreed upon by all stakeholders. Charrettes work best for sophisticated and controversial urban design and planning problems. They can be used for any planning

problem, such as revitalization and infill, regional plans, environmental plans, new community master plans, transportation, and affordable housing.

### Round Tables:

Round tables are informal group discussions, usually conducted around a topic or issue of interest. Issues are examined through in-depth discussion by participants, all of which are stakeholders, thus providing for a variety of points of view.



### Visioning:

Visioning is the process by which participants imagine their future community. It is most effective if done at the onset of a planning process. Visioning can be accomplished through a number of different procedures, such as charrettes or community opinion surveys, and is often undertaken by utilizing a visual preference survey or cognitive mapping.

Visual preference surveys involve showing participants a series of images and having them score them according to their preference. Images of various planning and design scenarios may be more effective than using descriptions, as terms such as “density” may mean different things to different people. Images are categorized by development types, housing styles, streetscape appearance, open space, commercial area design, etc. Visual preference surveys guide the planning team in preparing goals and strategies that will achieve the designs most preferred by the group.

Cognitive mapping provides perceptions about a community for determining future land uses and development areas.



Participants create a “mental map” of different locations throughout a community. An individual’s cognitive map may indicate local travel routes, areas that participants visit frequently, areas perceived to be safe, etc. Next, participants are asked to outline areas where they would like to see

future commercial, residential, or industrial development, recreation areas, preserved open space, etc. This is referred to as a “Futures Map.” A “Composite Map” is then prepared by the facilitator that shows consistent patterns or ideas represented in the maps created by the participants. Cognitive mapping can be done individually or in groups of two or three. Cognitive mapping exercises are often completed digitally using GIS mapping technology.

### Non- Traditional Events:



Events that encourage members of the public to collaborate with planners, officials, and other stakeholders in any way are beneficial to any project, regardless of size or scope. Aside from the techniques listed above, there are ways of holding other events, like giving tours, hosting virtual e-meetings, or planning “games” and events for youth that encourage creativity and foster cohesion.

### Event Planning

Successful public events result from preparation and attention to detail. Below is a diagram of elements that make for effective public meetings:



### Location and Signage:

Meetings should be held at a location that is easy for potential stakeholders and participants to find and access. It should be ADA accessible and, when possible, transit accessible. Possible locations include schools, community centers, libraries, religious institutions, or municipal facilities. For some projects, it may be beneficial to meet in a neutral location that all members of a community feel comfortable visiting.

### Time:

Meetings should be at a time that maximizes potential attendance and should consider when potential attendees will not be constrained by work or other commitments.

### Room Set-up:

The room should be set up appropriately for the type of meeting being held. For example, group work may require tables, while an open house may require little to no seating. Generally, ample seating for all participants should be provided, as well as adequate and adjustable lighting.



### Agenda/Feedback:

A meeting agenda should be developed in advance and a copy made available to meeting participants. Agendas should identify not only the topic to be covered, but also speakers or facilitators. In addition, meeting facilitators should provide a way for attendees to give feedback without speaking publicly, such as comment sheets.

### Refreshments:

Providing refreshments at a public meeting may serve to further meeting objectives. Depending on the budget, refreshments may include light snacks or a catered meal for more involved participation processes.

### Meeting Supplies:

Ensure that there is an ample supply of necessary tools, such as pencils, pens, markers, paper, easels, tape, or other items that may be needed during the participation process.

### Staff:

Staff should determine how the event will be run and who will be responsible for which tasks. The number of staff members and volunteers should depend on expected attendance.

Staff members should be located throughout the room during an event to answer questions, replenish supplies, and monitor the volume and view of the presentations. Depending on the anticipated audience of a meeting, translators should also be on hand.



### Meeting Facilitator:

A meeting facilitator sets the tone for the meeting and provides leadership and structure. A facilitator should keep track of agenda topics, establish ground rules, manage time to ensure that all topics are covered, introduce speakers, field questions, make sure all those who want to speak are acknowledged, and describe how the participation process will work, including any ground rules. For a potentially contentious project, it may be beneficial to hire a facilitator from outside of the community. In addition to the primary facilitator, it may be necessary to have a second facilitator or note taker.

## Getting the Word Out

It is important that residents and stakeholders within a community know when and where public events will be held, as well as relevant information related to a planning project. Most importantly, events and information should be posted in a variety of formats to reach various audiences.

**Websites:** Municipal or external websites provide a vast opportunity for information sharing, including upcoming meetings, past meeting minutes, maps, plans, diagrams, reports, and contact information. Web resources can also be used in the actual participation process, such as web-based surveys, opportunities for comment, or interactive mapping programs.

**Newsletters:** Newsletters, in print or digital format, provide a regular source of information that can be distributed at various stages of the planning process.

**Displays and Exhibits:** Throughout the planning process, posters of important maps, pictures, and text may be displayed in high-traffic public places. Always provide resources for additional information, as well as a project's contact person.

**Direct Mailing:** Direct mailings work best when the message is simple and an audience is easily identifiable.

**Community Calendar:** A typical calendar is filled with important meeting dates, information about the process, and/or photos. This can be printed and on display in a public place or on a website.

**Community Partnerships:** An effective way to outreach to varied audiences is to coordinate with community organizations, educational institutions, or other partners to promote an outreach process. For instance, project managers can be added to the agenda of a civic association meeting; project information can be displayed at a community event or fair; or an informational newsletter can be forwarded to the president of a community organization for dissemination to its members.

Listed below is a variety of tools utilizing traditional outreach and media outlets to get the word out about a project, plan, or event.

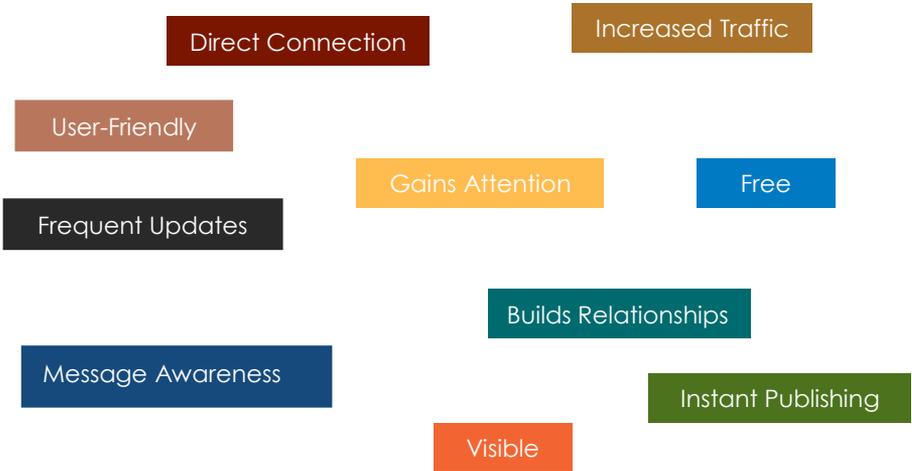
Newspaper Inserts	A “fact sheet” within local papers provides community-wide distribution of information.
Advertisements	Paid advertisements in newspapers and magazines reach a broad audience.
Feature Stories	Focus stories on general, project-related issues are used to garner interest in a project and to convey information to the public.
Public Notices	Public notices printed in newspapers are the minimum legal requirement necessary when advertising opportunities for public participation.
Media Releases	A concise review of the project/issue is released to electronic and print media and is useful in announcing project kick-offs, project completions, or other milestones.
News Conferences	Large news conferences provide an opportunity to reach several media outlets at one time. This should be limited to extremely newsworthy events.
Media Liaisons	Members from the media are invited to participate as nonvoting members on area planning committees. This allows for consistent and accurate media coverage of the planning process.
Television Advertisements	Ads on local TV stations identify public meeting times and locations.

## Social Media

Social media is a form of communication and interaction that allows people to publish various forms of content within online communities. It blends technology with traditional social relationships to share and exchange text, video, audio, images, and other multimedia. Social media depends heavily on user participation and user-generated content.

Social media is on the forefront of a new trend in collaboration that is exemplified by the ability to communicate and send information quickly and efficiently; it offers an opportunity for a wide variety of users to participate. Communities are encouraged to allocate time to respective social media websites by creating pages for their communities that contain updates on community activity, contact information for officials, and ways of contributing user-generated comments and questions. Communities also need to ensure that staff time is devoted to maintaining and updating social media outlets.

### Benefits of Social Media



### Social Networking: Facebook



Facebook is an online social networking tool that allows people to communicate with each other and share information. Facebook community pages can be an invaluable tool when marketing a community, as it reaches a large audience, interacts with individual members of the audience, and shares relevant information. Appropriate Facebook content include: links, news articles, notes, and photo albums.

### Media Sharing: Flickr, Picasa, YouTube, Vimeo

Sharing photos, videos, and other creative material is a great way to engage viewers. Instead of sharing news and information through traditional means and written news, consider videos and/or photographs focusing on local events. Media shared through these sharing websites can also be promoted with other forms of social media, like personal or municipal pages.

### Blogs: Blogger, Wordpress

Blogs are types of websites that use a combination of text, photographs, and videos to engage a digital community. They can be updated and edited easily, which makes it appealing to those creating content and those who rely on particular blogs for timely news. Posts can also be promoted through other forms of social media.

### Microblogging: Twitter



Twitter is a unique social networking site that enables users to post up to 140 characters at a time, called a “tweet, which can include links to websites and photos. Individuals with a Twitter account can choose to follow posts from organizations, businesses, and other individuals, resulting in a personalized user experience. More importantly, users, including municipalities, can connect with each other to announce joint efforts and events, or to cross-promote partners.

### Quick Tips for Sharing Information Through Social Media

- Make general announcements, including town headlines, government news, committee or council information, events, announcements, and links to other social media outlets;

- Share “rich content,” or non-text-based content, to show elements of life in your community, such as photos taken at community events, videos, or interviews of town residents and officials;
- Engage other social media users by encouraging your audience to comment and give feedback quickly (Examples include posting polls, trivia questions, fun facts, or design or photo contests);
- Consider content that can be used for discussion purposes (This can be done on a static website or through social media outlets. Possible conversations can include favorite memories of the town, questions, town reviews, or personal stories.).

### For More Information

Congress for New Urbanism. <[www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org)>. 11 March 2011

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*Planning for Community Involvement: Guidebook for Citizens and Local Planners*. State of Georgia Department of Community Affairs. April 2005.

*Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making*. US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration/Federal Transit Authority. August 2002.

*Public Participation Plan: A Strategy for Citizen Involvement*. Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission. Philadelphia, PA, 2008.

Sarnoff, Henry. *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2000.

### On the Web:

For additional information on DVRPC public participation, environmental justice, and Title VI activities, visit: [www.dvrpc.org/GetInvolved](http://www.dvrpc.org/GetInvolved).

DVRPC Interactive Environmental Justice Mapping Tool: [www.dvrpc.org/TitleVI](http://www.dvrpc.org/TitleVI)

This site is intended to be a resource for DVRPC staff and residents of the nine-county Greater Philadelphia region. As part of DVRPC's work in meeting Environmental Justice (EJ) and Title VI nondiscrimination requirements, a methodology was created, and refined in subsequent years, to identify populations that may be adversely affected by transportation and regional planning decisions. Each population group identified may have specific planning-related challenges to address in DVRPC plans and programs. The map is searchable by county, municipality, or census tract.

Links Page: <http://www.dvrpc.org/Links/Public.htm>

DVRPC maintains a constantly updated links page to websites, articles, and academic studies related to EJ/Title VI/ Public Participation from its planning partners, nonprofit institutions, and the public sector.

The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission is dedicated to uniting the region's elected officials, planning professionals and the public with a common vision of making a great region even greater. Shaping the way we live, work and play, DVRPC builds consensus on improving transportation, promoting smart growth, protecting the environment and enhancing the economy. We serve a diverse region of nine counties: Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia in Pennsylvania; and Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Mercer in New Jersey. DVRPC is the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization for the Greater Philadelphia Region – leading the way to a better future.

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DVRPC fully complies with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and related statutes and regulations in all programs and activities. DVRPC's website ([www.dvrpc.org](http://www.dvrpc.org)) may be translated into multiple languages. Publications and other public documents can be made available in alternative languages and formats, if requested. For more information, please call (215) 238-2871.



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