



Strategic Visioning for Community and Economic Development:

KEYS TO MANAGING PUBLIC DIALOGUE



The availability of new funding through state and federal grants over the past several years has made it possible for many counties and regional development organizations to plan and implement local initiatives that focus on community visioning, economic development and sustainability. While some residents in these communities embrace such initiatives as opportunities to create stronger, more vibrant places and improve quality of life, other residents may view them as a potential infringement on individual property rights and as a challenge to their vision of the future direction of the community.¹

Open discussion about a community's vision for the future is a clear example of the democratic process in action. To lead a successful community dialogue, it is essential that the process is held in a civil and respectful manner and that all opinions can be heard.

To assist local and regional leaders to facilitate constructive public engagement about community visioning, economic development and sustainability, the National Association of Counties (NACo) conducted an interactive, online webinar, "Everyone Remain Calm: Effective Strategies for Engaging Your Community on Sustainability."

This guide references the tools and unique examples presented during the 2012 webinar, and it discusses how to effectively engage stakeholders in the community. The content is organized into the following topics:

- **Effective Messaging**
- **Meeting Design and Management**
- **Presenting Decisions**

This guide is a companion to another NACo guide, *Strategic Visioning for Community and Economic Development: Keys to Engaging Stakeholders*. Together the guides are intended to provide local and regional leaders with tips and resources regarding effective public engagement and dialogue.

Effective Messaging

The terminology that local and regional leaders use when engaging residents in community visioning, economic development planning and project review is an important element in a dialogue's success. If the language fails to resonate with residents, local and regional officials may unnecessarily face opposition, criticism that the outcome is predetermined or that outside entities or only a few individuals are influencing the process.

Therefore, experts recommend the following when describing to the public initiatives that focus on community visioning, economic development and sustainability:

Organize “Proof Points”

Effective messaging begins with outlining the key objectives of the visioning, planning or project discussion during the public engagement phase. “Proof points” are pieces of evidence used in the marketing industry to strengthen a case.²

“Factual” and “emotional” proof points help localize messages and make them relevant to specific audiences. Proof points can make the message more believable and memorable and provide compelling “sound bites” that resonate with the audience. Examples include:

- “A revitalized downtown is good for business and will create jobs. In the last year, we have brought four new businesses to State Street in the space that sat vacant for decades. Now, three other buildings on the block are being redeveloped for commercial and residential use.”
- “Improved roadways and public transportation have provided new options for residents. With new bus lines running between Kingston and Johnstown between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m., there are more options for commuting to downtown jobs. Residents can travel to work while leaving their cars at home and saving on parking fees.”

Choose Positive Language

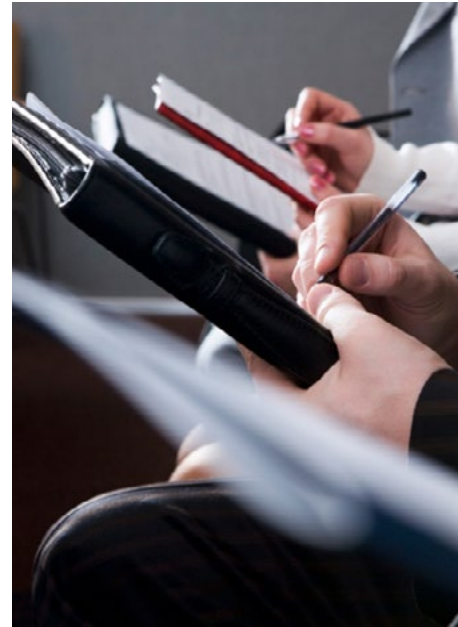
In 2011, the American Planning Association (APA) conducted a random sample survey of city and county residents across the country and identified terms and concepts that are viewed favorably. They include “fair,” “local,” “choice,” “inclusive,” “economic prosperity” and “good business sense.”³

The survey revealed that individuals generally support initiatives that connect sustainability, local and regional planning and livability to economic value, efficiency, and sound investment.⁴

Stay on Message

Effective messaging requires that local and regional officials develop and use a clear and consistent set of messages when speaking with the public and the media. Templates and talking points can also be developed to guide print and electronic communications.

Moreover, local and regional leaders can use communications to further build the community's general knowledge and understanding about their role in community visioning, economic development planning or review of specific projects.



MEASURABLE ECONOMIC BENEFITS

- Return on investment (ROI)
- Cost savings over the life of projects
- Reduced maintenance cost
- Jobs created
- Improved efficiency
- Improved business competitiveness
- Reduced operating costs for local businesses
- Reduced cost of living for local residents
- New businesses and innovative workforce attracted to communities
- Disaster damage mitigated
- Property value protected

Keep It Local

Local and regional officials often communicate best with the public by connecting a proposed community vision, plan or project to meeting immediate challenges and concerns in the community, such as downtown flooding or rush hour congestion. In the situation where a regional development effort is being considered, local and regional officials can illustrate how the proposed plan, such as a watershed protection or workforce development program, is locally driven but planned and implemented more effectively and efficiently at the regional level in cooperation with surrounding jurisdictions and key state and federal agencies.

Build an Economic Case

Establishing linkages between economic development and environmental protection — using tools and methods that measure the economic benefit of a project (see sidebar) — can help build support for a proposed community vision, plan or project.⁵ Incorporating the interests of the business community by engaging organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, Realtors Association and Farm Bureau may result in identifying private market solutions and local entrepreneurship opportunities and yield additional community support.⁶

Address Choice

It can be valuable to emphasize how the public engagement process for a proposed community vision, plan or project allows residents to provide input and help choose the tailored strategies and design for their community. For example, while a 2010 study by the Brookings Institution found support for walkable communities in many regions across the country,⁷ that goal may not appeal to other communities. Local and regional leaders can emphasize that proposed initiatives reflect the choices of local residents.

Avoid Any Suggestions of Predetermined Outcomes

In some cases, opponents may contend that local and regional leaders initiated the public engagement process with predetermined outcomes in mind. It is important to communicate that the public engagement process is undertaken in a sincere effort to collect and incorporate direct community input, and that the resulting community vision, plan or project will be shaped by that input.⁸

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

Richland County, S.C. Employs Note Card Technique

In 2000 and 2001, the Richland County Board of Commissioners considered a billboard ban along the county's highway system. Residents became very emotionally involved about the issue, which could have altered the community's aesthetics. To alleviate a sense of distrust and secrecy within the county government, Richland County Public Information Officer Stephany Snowden hosted public meetings at the local library, a neutral place away from the traditional Board meeting setting.

To maintain order in meetings, Snowden asked participants to write their questions down on note cards, and she read them aloud. A local reporter, being a neutral party, then facilitated a Q&A period with a panel of experts. "This meeting format helped reduce heated conversation and minimize anger," Snowden said. To learn more about Richland County, visit www.richlandonline.com.



“We use a lot of jargon. I’m actually excited to go back and write the plan in more layman’s terms. I think it will result in a better document... At the end of the day, if [opposition] provides an opportunity to produce a better document that more of the community can get behind, that’s okay.”

— Kirk Turner, Planning Director
Chesterfield County, Va.

Meeting Design and Management

A key part of effective public engagement is the ability to conduct successful public meetings. Successful public meetings: 1) are open to all residents, 2) focus on local concerns, 3) welcome diverse perspectives and 4) clearly address defined objectives, according to Trudy Rice, Community Development Associate Specialist at Kansas State University Research and Extension.

Public meetings provide the best opportunity to receive community feedback and gain support. They also provide the best opportunity for critics to voice opposition. Successful public meetings require proper planning in the following areas:

Meeting Format

Most people are familiar with a traditional public hearing. “The common public hearing format is ripe for people shouting out anonymously,” says Patrick Beggs, professional facilitator at North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension. “Public hearings often entail a panel on stage presenting, and then community members providing their one to three minutes. They only have a short time to speak, so they try to make the most of it.”⁹

Another disadvantage of the traditional town-hall style meeting is that the participants often respond to a proposed community vision, plan or project that has already been developed, rather than providing input at the initial stages and throughout the planning process.

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

Johnson County, Kan. Incorporates Sustainability into Comprehensive Planning

When Johnson County began soliciting input for its County Comprehensive Plan update, staff decided to take a different approach. County Planners organized focus groups of like-minded individuals to facilitate in-depth conversations among residents with overlapping interests. Focus group meetings were held for business leaders, area institutions (leaders of area schools and churches) and elected representatives (state, local, and neighborhood leaders). To learn more, visit <http://planning.jocogov.org>.



Local and regional leaders are encouraged to try new ideas and methods for public meetings and dialogues. In fact, some counties and regional development organizations are finding success by moving away from the traditional town-hall style meeting format (see examples). A series of neighborhood planning workshops can be more complex and expensive to conduct, for example, but they may provide results with more public support.

Workshop style meetings provide everyone, including potential critics, with a literal “seat at the table,” enabling all ideas to be heard in a conversational format. In workshop style meetings, participants break out into groups, discuss potential options, develop their own scenarios and present them to the larger group. Then, through a consensus building process, the scenarios can be vetted, fine-tuned and combined into one vision.

Set Ground Rules and Expectations

Before addressing main agenda items, it is important for meeting facilitators to dedicate time to establishing ground rules, including a requirement that all participants express concerns politely and respectfully. Meeting facilitators should set clear expectations among stakeholder groups by describing the overall community visioning, planning or project review process, including how public input will be incorporated, anticipated outcomes and next steps. The goal here is to ensure that participants understand how their input will be integrated into plans and implementation strategies.

The use of note cards or electronic voting to collect feedback — instead of microphones and podiums — can help maintain civil discourse. These techniques also help ensure that all comments, not just those from the most vocal participants, receive attention.¹⁰

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

Albemarle County, Va. Hosts Drop-In Workshops with Visual Displays

Albemarle County, the City of Charlottesville and the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission coordinated the “Many Plans, One Community” process to promote sustainability and regional long-range planning. County leaders hosted a series of 3-hour workshop-style public events where stakeholders were free to come and go as they wished. Each workshop featured a poster series related to the topics being discussed, such as transportation or historic and scenic resources, to portray possible development scenarios. Visitors were encouraged to post comments on each poster using sticky notes, as well as respond to questions that were written on large flip-charts and included in a questionnaire. Staff circulated throughout the room to engage visitors in one-on-one conversations, which were later transcribed onto the posters for incorporation into the plan’s recommendations. “We got a lot of input, and we forged a lot of good relationships with former critics,” said Summer Frederick, Project Manager for the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission.

When preparing for the workshops, the Planning District staff hosted staff orientations, even visiting staff from the city, county and community organizations. The orientations enabled staff to familiarize themselves with the posters and content presented, identify “topic experts” to field stakeholder questions and train to engage community members one-on-one. Staff developed a strategy for redirecting conversation when they felt hijacked, boxed-in or threatened. To learn more, visit www.1-community.org.

Presenting Decisions

Inclusive public engagement, strong messaging and effective meeting management are important methods for mitigating potential conflicts from arising in public forums, but sometimes the dialogue may become heated anyway. Local and regional leaders may find themselves in positions where they must defend decisions or answer tough or accusatory questions about a proposal.

In those circumstances, the best strategy is to maintain focus on a positive, inclusive message and provide factual information. The public engagement process exists for everyone's voice to be heard, and conflict can be managed best by validating questions and directing respectful discussion, not by shutting down the opposition.

Experts recommend the following strategies:

Maintain Composure

If meeting participants become angry and raise their voices, meeting facilitators should not match their anger. They should continue to speak at a normal volume and be aware that voice tone and body language should be positive, not defensive. Facilitators have found success saying, "I can hear that you are passionate about these issues. We need to make sure that we stay on the topic and give everyone a chance to speak."

Avoid Heated Exchange

With heated confrontation, there is often limited opportunity for constructive debate. The goal is not to defeat critics but instead to ensure that the dialogue remains on topic and remains productive. When responding to questions and comments, meeting facilitators and local and regional officials are advised to consciously avoid condescending tones and personal attacks.¹¹

Redirect Conversation in a Positive Direction

It is common for participants to be excited by the opportunity to speak, and they can move far beyond the topic at hand. If this occurs, meeting facilitators can explain the purpose of the meeting again, referring back to the ground rules stated at the beginning of the meeting.¹²

When participants ask off-topic questions, a common redirection strategy is to take negative questions and form bridges to positive answers. Facilitators can answer questions directly and truthfully, even if with only a quick response, such as "that's correct." The facilitator can follow up with a bridge phrase and answer more fully. Examples of bridge phrases include:¹³

- Thank you for your comment; however...
- What is really important to understand is...
- That is a good question...

For More Information

A recording of the 2012 NACo webinar, "Everyone Remain Calm: Effective Strategies for Engaging Your Community on Sustainability," and copies of the presentations made during the webinar can be found at www.naco.org/talkingsustainability.





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About NACo

The National Association of Counties (NACo) assists America's counties in pursuing excellence in public service by advancing sound public policies, promoting peer learning and accountability, fostering intergovernmental and public-private collaboration, and providing value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. Founded in 1935, NACo provides the elected and appointed leaders from the nation's 3,069 counties with the knowledge, skills and tools necessary to advance fiscally responsible, quality-driven and results-oriented policies and services to build healthy, vibrant, safe and fiscally resilient counties. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org.

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