

Improving Public Participation

Elizabeth A. Della Valle, AICP

Friends of Midcoast Maine

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I was asked to prepare this presentation because of concern that interest in public participation in the midcoast is waning. Questions related to this concern include whether those who offer opportunities for participating are getting tired of soliciting input and if people are tired of participating. Our workshop is intended to help you obtain more and better community engagement in your planning effort.



I want to note that if you've come tonight expecting me to hand you a recipe or 5-step process to increase the number of people who come to meetings, you might be surprised because I don't have one. Rather, I will offer you a philosophy, a set of tools, and a few success stories because there is no single formula, but there are techniques that have helped others ensure a good process and plan.

My philosophy of public participation is that "For a plan to be valuable to a community, an informed community must be engaged in creating that plan."

You can certainly create a plan without engaging the public, but you may find that:

- It doesn't get adopted by the voters,
- It doesn't get funded by your constituency,
- It misses good opportunities that a diverse set of advisors may have brought to your attention,

- You end up spending scarce funds on a less valuable project,
- You have alienated factions in your community, or
- The plan may simply “sit on a shelf.”



Public participation is a two-way street of sharing information and soliciting input to build consensus for a shared vision and strategy to achieve it.

Public Participation is a Two-Way Street

- Sharing information
and
- Soliciting input



To help me focus this presentation, I’m going to ask you a few questions. Who are you? Are you a member of a planning board? A select board? A conservation commission? A comprehensive plan committee? A land Trust? Another non-profit? A developer? Others?

How have you tried to reach out to your community to ensure public participation in your projects or in what ways have you tried to participate yourself? What kind of planning effort have you been involved in? What kind of planning process are you engaged in?

Help Me Focus



Who are you?
How have you reached out to your community?
How have you tried to participate yourself?
What kinds of issues are you planning?

Who are your stakeholders and interest groups? Who are the movers and shakers in your community, who will become involved in one way or another at some point in your effort? How does information typically get shared or transferred in your community? How long do you have between the beginning and end of your planning effort? These, and other questions, provide clues as to how best to design your public participation process.

Throughout this presentation I will be talking about examples of how other Maine towns have used different techniques to illustrate their effectiveness.

Know Your Audience!

- What is your purpose?
- Who are your stakeholders?
- Who are your movers and shakers?
- How does information get shared?
- How long do you have to plan?



Knowing your audience is the most important aspect of improving your public participation process.

Who are the movers and shakers?

- Key people
- Important constituencies
- Influential organizations



Who are the key people, constituencies, and organizations in your community? Identify them early in the process and personally encourage them to become involved – join the advisory committee, come to forums, workshops, visioning sessions, and workshops. Drawing them into the process in a meaningful way early on and throughout the process can make the difference between a so-so plan or one that gets blown out of the water when it's time for action to adopt and implement it.

Example of commitment of movers in shakers in community of North Yarmouth sheparding the development and adoption of its comprehensive plan and ordinances to implement through the public process.

Don't rely on people to come to your meetings. Go to their meetings.

What are the influential organizations?



- Go to them
- Make informational presentations
- Ask for their reaction and input

If there are influential organizations that meet regularly or periodically, ask to be on their agenda to make a presentation about the information you have gathered or proposals you are considering. Ask them what they think the problems or issues are. Ask them for their reaction to your informational presentation. Ask them for their input. They provide a ready-made forum to both share information and to solicit input.

Example of engagement of Rotary and Chamber of Commerce through beginning, middle, and end of Comprehensive Plan process helped ensure adoption by 83% of voters

Besides business groups, think about which are the key organizations? The grange? Church groups? PTA? Garden Club? Others?

Don't forget that some members of your community won't come to meetings no matter what you do. Some people are too busy to come to meetings. For them, a meeting is time taken away from their family or requires them to give up precious free-time. Some people are shy. Some people simply are not comfortable speaking in large groups. Some are even uncomfortable speaking in small groups.

Some people won't come to meetings

- Busy
- Shy or uncomfortable speaking in large groups

Engage them with

- Interviews
- Information on web and in newsletters
- Media coverage
- Quick surveys
- Displays at key locations and events
- Through the schools and other organizations



Their opinions count, too. Offer those people other ways to get information about your project and other ways to offer their input.

Example of interviews of merchants in Van Buren at beginning of preparation of Downtown Revitalization Plan.

Example of web postings of information related to various planning projects in Yarmouth, Falmouth, Bar Harbor.

Example of hosting an information booth at Summerfest in Oakland.

Diversity of Opportunities to Participate

- Conventional tools – postcards, mailings, surveys, fliers, posters
- Grassroots efforts – phone calls, personal appeals, raffles, bean suppers, community events
- Involve the schools – integrate into curriculum
- 21st century tools – public access TV, web page, other techniques



Offer a diverse mix of opportunities for people to get information about:

- What you are doing,
- The information you are collecting,
- The analyses you are performing,
- The conclusions you are reaching,
- The ways you are building their input into your revisions, and
- Ways they can contribute their thoughts and concerns to your efforts.

Take the time to think about how people interact within your community. Create a strategy that will take you from the beginning to the end of your process. Build on those groups, locations, and events that are most important to your community. Periodically assess public interest and attitude about your project and adjust your strategy, as appropriate. Report back on how their input has modified your thinking or recommendations. Establish a time frame and try to stick to it. Example described in the video Growing Together: Consensus Building, Smart Growth, and Community Change.

The Key Is To



- Be creative
- Be persistent
- Maintain strategic focus
- Establish a time frame

When it comes to public meetings, more is not necessarily better. Holding fewer well-attended sessions at which critical policy matters are discussed is vastly preferable to many poorly attended ones.

A universal observation is that food and controversy will bring people out.

Hold meetings and workshops on most important topics. What are the topics that are most likely to elicit interest and feedback? More members of the community are likely to come out for meetings where issues that are controversial or that they care about are being discussed. Avoid holding meeting solely to present information that could be posted on a website or made available elsewhere.

Make sure the most important or outspoken people are at your meetings. Make a list of who those people and groups are. Invite everyone – mail or deliver postcards to all property owners, residents, and businesses. Put up posters advertising the event at many well-frequented locations in town. But don't stop there. Make phone calls or visits to movers and shakers to personally invite and encourage them to attend to express their views. Tell them you need to hear what they have to say. Example of Advisory Committee making personal contacts to invite movers and shakers to public forum in Oakland

Be clear about what you will be asking participants to do. The planners working on the Brunswick Naval Air Station redevelopment advise that if you are asking for their input, say so and be explicit in how you are going to solicit it. If you are not truly asking for input, be clear on that and structure the meeting to be more educational than participatory.

Vary the times, days of the week, and locations of meetings. Different people are available at different times of the day and different days of the week. Example of Bar Harbor morning and evening sessions bringing out different groups of people at the different sessions.

Consider holding neighborhood forums focusing on concerns and issues of a particular area of your community. They may be more productive than town-wide sessions. Example of the Brunswick four-day charette which compressed the public process

Public Meetings

- More not necessarily better
- Food and controversy
- Target most important topics
- Assure important people attend
- Be clear about what will happen at the meeting
- Consider different times, days, and venues
- Make their time count!

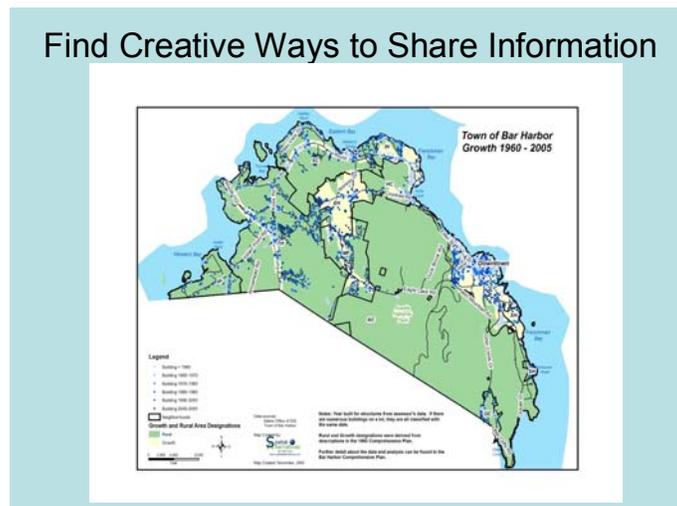




Recognize the purpose and limits of surveys. The primary purpose of typical surveys is to give people another way to offer their opinions. Unless you do a random sample phone survey, your survey is not likely to be statistically valid. Those who are interested will respond to the survey, which can skew results. Similarly, the way questions are worded or answers are prompted can also skew the results of a survey. For that reason, consider the results, but don't let them hamstring you if there is a good reason to consider an option that doesn't rate highly. Many communities are forgoing expensive, long mail out surveys for two or three quick, 3 – 5 question surveys that can be administered on-line or passed out and collected at a community forum or event.

Example of Falmouth doing on-line surveys..

Find creative ways to share your evaluation of the existing situation. Example of Bar Harbor's map showing development of past 15 years going exactly where community didn't want growth..



Challenge approaches that don't seem to be working or which appear to have undesirable unintended consequences, supported by visualization techniques and compelling analysis.

I'm not going to dwell on this right now because Judy Colby-George of Spatial Alternatives, Inc. will be presenting a lot more information about some of these techniques later in our presentation.

Other Creative Techniques

- Involve the schools
www.kidsconsortium.org/
- Play devil's advocate
- Use humor
- Be visual
- Use different techniques at each meeting
- Hold visioning sessions
- Build consensus



Involve the schools – integrate a planning topic into the curriculum. Engage your youth and you will gain the attention of their parents. Examples of art competition, display, and calendar in Old Orchard, covers for plans in Cape Elizabeth. Contact information for KIDS Consortium.

Use drawings, maps, photographs, dot voting, and other techniques, particularly visual ones or those that physically engage participants. Ask questions that require a response

Use the role of devil's advocate selectively, with good humor, and without creating defensiveness to challenge conventional wisdom and address common misconceptions.

Consider holding sessions to generate community consensus about a vision for the future of the town or organization.

Examples of visioning in Bar Harbor, Arundel, Carrabassett Valley, Harpswell, Kennebunkport, Newry, Ogunquit, Sanford, Turner, Waterboro.

Avoid



- Misusing survey results
- Too many meetings
- Boring meetings
- Personal attacks and unpleasantness
- Open-ended time frame

Make a strong case for why problems are pertinent to the community and solutions are important to pursue. Early “buy-in” by the public is necessary before your community can focus squarely on the problem with a sense of common purpose. Advocate and strongly endorse a course of action – even in the face of initial public skepticism or even opposition, when appropriate, and with sensitivity.

Fully explore issues, make meaningful proposals, and explain the thinking behind them. For the general public that is not immersed in the project, some suggestions may on first blush seem unnecessary or even radical. You may find that once the background for decision-making and pros and cons of the proposed strategy are laid out, opposition may shift to support.

Example of Bar Harbor’s use of a newspaper tabloid insert, engagement of the local newspaper in publishing the tabloid, editorial supporting adoption of the plan, op ed articles, general articles about the plan), and presentations to community organizations.

Key to Success

Participation that offers a mix of techniques to:

- keep people informed
- engage cross-section of community
- entertain and teach
- make people feel their input matters

