

NEW APPROACHES TO PUBLIC MEETINGS

Encouraging Civil Discourse and Community Collaboration

by Mary Thompson, Corder/Thompson & Associates

Everyone is familiar with the traditional public meeting: a long succession of speakers, political rhetoric, and polarized issues, often lasting late into the night. These types of meetings mostly serve the function of the city offering information and the citizens offering their positions. Usually, both sides are scripted -- for the benefit of strengthening their positions and playing to the press. What really gets accomplished at such meetings? What does this type of meeting contribute in terms of encouraging civil discourse or creative solutions to important problems?

The recent trend to more collaborative approaches to community decision making has resulted in innovative approaches to public meetings. These new approaches tend to be characterized by the following:

Participant interaction. Rather than structure the meeting to have a series of citizens making statements, these more collaborative approaches encourage two-way communication and citizen dialogue.

Problem-solving orientation. Traditional public meetings tend to encourage debates that polarize the issues and focus on whose way is the best way. Increasingly, city governments are trying to move citizens away from a focus on beating the opposition to a focus on how to best work together to solve the problem.

Timely feedback and follow up. Citizens who see no response or follow up to their input quickly become cynical about the public input process. The public is much more likely to trust a process that demonstrates that their input was heard, considered, and when appropriate, acted upon.

Following are three examples of the ways Texas cities are using innovative approaches to public meetings.

San Marcos: Framing a Positive Dialogue

The City of San Marcos sought public input on a variety of options regarding a road extension project. With the help of Director of Engineering Laurie Anderson, San Marcos developed a public meeting format designed to encourage a meaningful and productive exchange of ideas.

After a briefing on the project by city staff, the meeting broke into a series of informal discussion groups. Three tables were set up with information on various aspects of the project: transportation, environment and land use. The tables were staffed by project consultants and city staff. Participants were encouraged to have refreshments, visit the tables and offer their viewpoints.

At each table, members of the public were asked to complete the following statement: "For this project to be successful, it should..." The public's responses were posted on boards at each table. As participants gathered at the tables to fill out their cards, they engaged in substantive and thoughtful dialogue with each other as well as with staff and consultants.

At the end of the meeting, citizens were given an evaluation form and asked to comment on the effectiveness of the meeting. In a follow-up mailing, each attendee received a written summary of all the comments.

Laurie Anderson, described a number of benefits to this approach:

- The question posed to the citizens minimized the tendency to engage in negative comments about the opposition, including the city. The positive orientation of the question yielded comments oriented to problem solving, rather than criticism.
- The informal gathering at the tables resulted in very constructive exchanges among the citizens with opposing views, as well as among citizens, staff and consultants.
- Posting the citizen comments on the board provided a way for each person's viewpoint to be seen by everyone. This not only addressed the public's need to "testify" but also allowed a form of public comment for participants who normally would never speak in front of a group.
- The citizen input was much more useable to policy makers than the very polarized complaints and rhetoric gathered at traditional public meetings.

McAllen: Putting the Public to Work

The City of McAllen initiated a visioning process for future planning. In an atmosphere of growth/no growth controversy, Planning Director Julie Rankin spearheaded a public input process that would bring the community together for hands-on involvement in creative problem solving.

Members of the public were invited to a day and a half charrette, or visioning workshop. Although the workshop was open to anyone, efforts were made to have a broad cross-section of the community represented. After a presentation by city staff and consultants, participants were asked to choose among several groups representing key components of the city's future, including housing, parks, tourism and the arts. Officials from city boards joined the group discussions.

Each group was led by a professional facilitator. Members of the public and public officials not only brainstormed their vision for the specific topic, but also were involved in creating a visual image of the city's future. Maps of the community were provided to the groups and participants worked together drawing various options on the maps. Toward the end of the workshop, each group reported on ideas and images that had been generated for its topic. Consultants took the drawings, combined the key ideas and presented a synthesized version and recommendations at a subsequent public meeting. This final public meeting was broadcast throughout the community on the municipal television station.

Deputy City Manager Brent Branham reported that there are a number of reasons that McAllen citizens seemed so satisfied with this experiment in public participation:

- A lot of work got accomplished efficiently and in a relatively short time.
- The small group interactions equalized participation, and encouraged a diversity of viewpoints.
- The hands-on involvement and discussion helped educate the public on the complexities of the issues of community growth. The growth/no growth opponents were more likely to moderate their views and understand the concerns of others.
- All ideas could be expressed and none were dismissed in the public meeting. Having the consultants refine and narrow the ideas between meetings meant that people were less likely to lose face as a result of their idea not being included in the final recommendations.
- The follow-up public meeting provided the feedback the public needed to see that their input and participation had been considered and used.

Plano: Taking the City Government to the Neighborhoods

Plano, Texas was looking for more effective ways to improve communication with its citizens. Approximately three years ago the Plano City Council initiated quarterly outreach meetings where city officials solicit concerns, questions and suggestions from ten geographical areas of the community.

Each quarter, the mayor, council members and city staff prepare to conduct a meeting in one of the ten neighborhoods. City staff compile a list of projects and issues in neighborhood and the mayor and council members are briefed in order to prepare them for the meeting. Although the meeting is open to any member of the public, specific invitations are sent to each household in the targeted neighborhood.

The mayor moderates each meeting, and after the introductory remarks, divides the participants (the number can range from 10 to 100) into small groups. Each group is asked to respond to the following questions:

What are the most important issues for the citizens of Plano?

In what ways can the Council and staff better serve the citizens?

What are the top two reasons that Plano is the best place to live?

Each group selects their own leader and works together for 30 to 40 minutes to develop prioritized responses to the questions. The Council and staff circulate among the groups to serve as a resource, but not to participate in the discussions.

At the end of the meeting, each small group reports on their discussion, the citizens have an opportunity to ask questions of the public officials, and comment cards are made available for any additional comments or requests. After the meeting, city staff compile all of the comments, questions and answers from the meeting, including any responses to the comment cards filled out at the end of the meeting. This summary is then distributed to the neighborhood residents attending the meeting.

Plano Executive Director Bruce Glasscock notes that the city plans to continue the outreach meetings for the following reasons:

- The meetings directly address the concerns of specific neighborhoods.
- The process is an effective method for modeling open government; neighbors have direct contact with the entire council, mayor and city staff.
- Citizens have an equal chance to express themselves; there is less tendency for a few people to dominate the discussion.
- The format encourages community building; neighbors are more likely to discover common concerns and interests. The meetings are a chance to begin to build consensus on neighborhood issues.

Factors for Effective Implementation

For these alternative approaches to public meetings to be effective, city managers and staff need to address several crucial factors:

Credibility and support for the process. Public officials, including the city manager, mayor, council members and members of city boards must be present in order for the public to believe that their input is valued. In addition, meetings on very polarized issues may benefit from community co-sponsors who would have credibility with constituencies that may view the city with suspicion.

Staff or consultants with process expertise. The success of these alternative forms of public meetings are often contingent on careful process design and skillful facilitation. City staff should have knowledge and skills in such areas such as collaborative policy development, group facilitation, and interest-based decision making.

Clear expectations of the meeting activities and outcomes. Citizens can participate most effectively in these types of processes when they come prepared. A citizen who has come to a public meeting expecting to deliver their prepared three-minute diatribe may have trouble adapting to a more cooperative mode of discourse. Meeting announcements and invitations should clarify the objectives, agenda and activities for the meeting in order to prepare citizens to communicate and problem solve productively.

Although public meetings can be challenging, each meeting is an opportunity. Increasingly, Texas cities are managing these opportunities in ways that foster communication, build public trust, and encourage cooperative efforts to finding creative solutions for Texas communities.

This article is one of a series on collaborative approaches to municipal decision making. Judy Corder and Mary Thompson of the Austin firm of Corder/Thompson & Associates specialize in collaborative approaches to dispute resolution, planning and policy development. For more information, contact Corder/Thompson & Associates at (512) 458-4427. To make suggestions about topics for future articles, call Mary Thompson or send an e-mail message to emmond@aol.com.