

# Preparing and Conducting Public Meetings

Comprehensive strategies and best practices



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Public meetings have become a cornerstone of community engagement, particularly for infrastructure projects that may significantly impact residents and stakeholders. As these meetings have evolved from simple information sessions to complex, interactive events, the approach to planning and execution must also adapt. This white paper offers a detailed guide for public engagement professionals on best practices for preparing and conducting effective public meetings that foster transparency, trust and meaningful dialogue.

## Understanding the Modern Public Meeting

The nature of public meetings has transformed, with stakeholders demanding more interactive and personalized experiences. The following elements are crucial in the modern context:

- **Multiple Information Stations:** The shift from traditional presentations to a station-based format allows for a more personalized interaction between stakeholders and subject matter experts (SMEs). Each station should focus on specific aspects of the project, such as environmental impact, land acquisition, construction timelines or safety concerns. This approach not only provides detailed information but also allows attendees to engage directly with the experts most relevant to their concerns.
- **Technology Integration:** Incorporating technology, such as Geographic Information System (GIS) stations, is increasingly expected in public meetings. GIS stations enable stakeholders to visualize their property in relation to the proposed project, help contextualize the project's impact, and gather precise feedback. Additionally, consider using interactive displays or virtual reality (VR) to provide immersive experiences to help attendees better understand the project's scope and implications.
- **Tailored Communication:** Understanding the demographics and concerns of the community is vital. Tailor the communication style, language and materials to resonate with the audience. For example, in a community with a high percentage of non-native speakers, providing translation services or bilingual materials can be crucial for effective communication.

## Preparing Your Team: Training, Simulation and Role Specialization

Proper preparation of your team is foundational to the success of a public meeting. Familiarize staff with the project details to ensure they are equipped to handle the dynamics of public interactions:

- **Comprehensive Mock Open Houses:** Simulate the public meeting environment through mock sessions that replicate the actual event. These should include role-playing scenarios where team members practice responding to a variety of questions, from simple inquiries to confrontational challenges. Ensure that these sessions cover a broad range of potential scenarios, including unexpected technical questions, emotionally charged interactions and group dynamics that could influence the tone of the meeting.
- **Continuous Observation and Feedback:** During mock sessions, closely observe each team member's performance, particularly their ability to remain calm under pressure, their clarity in communication and their overall demeanor. Provide constructive feedback and additional coaching where needed. This process should be iterative, with multiple practice sessions allowing continuous improvement.
- **Role Specialization and Designation of Floaters:** Assign specific roles to team members based on their strengths. For instance, more technically inclined staff might be best placed at stations dealing with detailed project aspects, while those with stronger interpersonal skills could serve as floaters or front-line greeters. Floaters, or "generalists," should be trained to assist in various situations, from answering general questions to stepping in during heated exchanges to de-escalate tensions.
- **Creating a Knowledge Base:** Develop a comprehensive internal knowledge base that includes FAQs, project details, anticipated questions and approved responses. All team members should have access to this information during preparation and at the event to ensure consistency and accuracy in the information provided to the public.



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## De-escalation Techniques and Conflict Management

Given the potential for tension and conflict at public meetings, it's crucial that your team is well-versed in de-escalation techniques:

- **Active Listening and Empathy Training:** Train staff to listen actively and show genuine empathy. This involves making eye contact, nodding and verbally acknowledging the attendee's concerns before responding. Empathy can be demonstrated by statements like, "I understand how this situation might be frustrating for you," which can help defuse hostility.
- **Structured Communication Strategies:** Equip your team with scripts that help them maintain control over the conversation while addressing concerns. Scripts should be flexible enough for natural dialogue but structured to keep the discussion focused and productive. Teach staff how to steer conversations back to constructive dialogue if they begin to escalate or deviate into unproductive areas.
- **Managing Group Dynamics:** Train staff on managing group dynamics, particularly in situations where the loudest voices might dominate the discussion or groupthink could escalate concerns. Techniques such as redirecting questions to other attendees, breaking up large groups into smaller discussions or even temporarily stepping away to allow tensions to cool can be effective.
- **Understanding Limits and Escalation Protocols:** Ensure that staff know when and how to escalate situations they cannot handle. This might involve signaling to a floater or security personnel or, in extreme cases, politely ending the conversation and offering to follow up later.

## Logistical Planning and Contingency Strategies

Detailed logistical planning is essential for the smooth execution of a public meeting. Consider the following aspects:

- **Venue Selection and Preparation:** Choose a venue that is easily accessible to the public and adequately equipped to handle the expected number of attendees. Consider parking availability, proximity to public transportation and ADA compliance. If the meeting is in a rural or less technologically equipped area, plan for alternative setups, such as generators, mobile hotspots or portable audio-visual equipment. Supplemental tents may even be needed if indoor facilities are too small (or nonexistent!). So, get to know the local event planning businesses in the project area.
- **Safety, Security and Emergency Preparedness:** Develop a comprehensive safety plan that includes first aid stations, evacuation routes and procedures for handling aggressive behavior. Security personnel should be briefed on maintaining order, the nuances of de-escalation and respectful interaction with the public. Ensure that all staff know these protocols and who to contact in case of an emergency.
- **Amenities and Comfort Considerations:** Ensure that both staff and attendees are comfortable. Provide adequate seating, climate control, restrooms and refreshments. For outdoor events, consider weather-related contingencies such as tents, fans or heaters and insect control measures. Offering refreshments, especially from local vendors, can enhance attendee satisfaction and support community goodwill.
- **Sustainability Practices:** Incorporate sustainability practices into your event planning where possible. This might include using recyclable materials for handouts, minimizing waste and providing digital copies of documents instead of printed ones.





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### Documentation, Reporting and Post-Meeting Follow-Up

The work continues even after the public meeting concludes. Documentation and follow-up are crucial for ensuring accountability and ongoing engagement:

- **Developing a Comprehensive Playbook:** Create an "open house playbook" that includes everything from the meeting schedule and staff assignments to emergency contacts and contingency plans. This playbook should be distributed to all team members well before the meeting and reviewed thoroughly during preparation sessions. Several iterations of the playbook may be necessary as team members make valuable suggestions.
- **Documentation During the Meeting:** Assign a team member or a third-party service to document the meeting thoroughly, including attendee feedback, questions raised and any notable interactions. Consider recording the event with appropriate permissions to capture the full context of the discussions. This documentation is invaluable for post-meeting analysis and for addressing any concerns that arise afterward.
- **Feedback Collection and Analysis:** Use comment cards, digital surveys or follow-up emails to gather feedback from attendees. Analyze this feedback to identify common concerns, areas of misunderstanding or opportunities for improvement in future engagements. This feedback should be shared with the broader project team to inform decision-making.
- **Timely and Transparent Follow-Up:** After the meeting, promptly follow up with attendees, especially those with specific questions or concerns. Provide them with additional information or updates as promised, and ensure that their input is reflected in the ongoing project planning. Transparency and responsiveness in this phase are vital to building trust and maintaining positive relationships with the community.



### Conclusion

As public meetings become increasingly complex and integral to the success of large-scale projects, public engagement professionals must adopt a meticulous and proactive approach. By embracing the strategies outlined above — ranging from thorough team preparation and advanced logistical planning to effective conflict management and detailed follow-up — organizations can meet and exceed community expectations, fostering a collaborative and positive environment for project development.

Through these best practices, public meetings can become more than just a procedural requirement; they can be a powerful tool for building trust, understanding and partnership between developers and the communities they serve. 🌟



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