

Session #8

Public Involvement – Low-Budget Can Mean High Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Public involvement on a small budget can result in a more effective [outreach](#) process. When an agency has more time than money, public involvement truly can start at “the earliest possible moment.”

Your community has untapped resources that can increase the time and money you have available. Once you start to identify [stakeholders](#) and existing organizations in the area, public involvement begins, with people designing, publicizing and implementing a process that **they** have developed.

Where and how you find these unrecognized resources and gain their support will be the focus of this presentation. In addition to examples of simple approaches to get your community active in transportation planning and problem solving, you will hear about the advantages of alliance building and volunteer contributions.

One example will be “[The Cousins Technique.](#)”

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT ON A LOW BUDGET CAN MEAN HIGH EFFECTIVENESS

Public involvement must start at the earliest possible moment when your agency does not have the resources needed to do “good” public involvement. Because you have limited resources, you have to ask for help from the agencies, departments, neighborhood groups, business, civic, professional, religious, and social organizations. The more that people and groups “help” you, the more folks will talk about helping, and more people will want to help. The more the “cousins” tell other “cousins”, the more human resources will become available for you. Your planning process and project implementation programs can become the “IN” thing to do in your town.

Many organizations and businesses provide their members and employees with training in group process e.g. problem identification, facilitation, conflict management, and consensus decision making. Social service providers, business leaders, neighborhood organizers, soil conservation agents, United Way chairs, Grange masters, university professors, students, ministers, chamber of commerce leaders, and other community stalwarts often have attended inter-personal skill building training provided by their national, state, and local organizations.

When you cannot find people within the community who possess these talents, you can bring into the community a public involvement/group process trainer. Next, invite a large group of citizens to receive the training. In exchange they contract with you to give "x" hours conducting public meetings, serving on task groups, etc. A simple contract with interested individuals formalizes their commitment. Each contract will increase your human resources pool. Using this approach, you can fill a card file with the names of people willing to conduct meetings. The trick is to have trained facilitators who live in different parts of the community.

The advantage of this approach is that the local facilitator is objective, cares about the community, and will not benefit from decisions that are made. The single purpose of this meeting facilitator is to give everyone present the opportunity to speak and to get answers to their questions.

As you increase your community network, you increase the community’s awareness of your agency’s work. You will be giving your agency a face and you will be reducing the alienation from “government” that many people feel.

The Recipe Card File

A recipe card file and a package of index cards are low cost supplies that can increase your public involvement success rate. It is a technique borrowed from a soil conservation agent who entered the names, addresses and vital information about every farmer, rancher, grower, community leader, elected and appointed official, on separate cards. He was especially interested in identifying the “hidden influence leaders” within the community. You can substitute a computer

card file, provided you have a back-up system that will preserve this human resource database. Card files do not crash.

Each card serves the same purpose as the business card you bring back from meetings and social events. You can record, for future contact, the name, address, telephone, fax, and e-mail numbers of individuals. Plus, you may want to add the organizations, business, hobbies, length of residence, talents, expertise, political affiliations, attitude toward your agency, recreational interests, availability and willingness to volunteer help, etc. Your core group will grow when you ask them for the names of other people who might be interested in working on a particular project and/or plan.

When you are ready to start the next project or a plan, open your “human resource database” and retrieve the cards with the names of the people who have signed up to help you. It is easy to think of a database of environmental, social, economic, and technical information; it may take some time to become accustomed to thinking of “people” as a database. They are sources of information vital to a transportation planning process. It is easier to accept this concept by remembering that people usually feel “honored-to-be-asked”.

Stakeholder is the current buzzword used in transportation planning to refer to folks who have a particular interest in a specific outcome of your work. Stakeholders can also be individuals who care about the quality of life of their whole community and are not project/plan focused. Including these “generalists” in your outreach will create a more balanced representation of community interests on work groups, committees, and task forces.

In addition to the individual citizens, staff of other agencies, departments, bureaus, and political jurisdictions are repositories of exceedingly valuable information that can affect your work. Because these “out-of-house” staff have different responsibilities and authority, they have different perspectives on your territory. They may be in contact with different people, they may enforce different regulations, and they most assuredly have useful information. These same agencies may have technical personnel and equipment that your agency cannot afford AND they may be willing to share. In exchange, find something you can share with them. Mutual benefit alliances, formal and informal, are another way to achieve cooperation and coordination among public and private entities.

Communication, Curriculums, and Current Events

School curriculums that include science, geography, government, etc. are another source of help, information, and community communication. You can tap into another under utilized resource by participating in “futures fairs”, “students in government” days, Earth Days, etc. When you have plans and projects that you want to tell everyone about, you can ask these same students to help build an information kiosk. They can conduct surveys at local stores, malls, fairs, horse shows,

rodeos, etc. The secret is to “**go where people are**”. Where the local school curriculum includes a module on city planning, teachers may be willing to give students credit for working on transportation projects sponsored by your agency.

Getting the Word Out

Businesses and civic organizations may be willing to pay for “door hangers”; this usually costs less than first class mail. Cleverly designed, these communication pieces tend to have a higher readership than letters. Billboards and point-of-sale display pieces, which have a common graphic theme, reinforce awareness of your message. Flyers can be distributed at banks and grocery stores to alert citizens when transportation plans and projects are proposed in their locale. Sponsor a design competition for the graphic theme of your project. You can grab some early press and have fun doing it.

Organizations have telephone trees, mailing lists, newsletters, meetings, and bulletin boards; all of these offer communication links to the community. When you have a message to convey about a meeting or participatory process and want to let the world know about it, ask for 15 minutes on a meeting agenda, and 15 lines in a newsletter. Civic and professional organizations welcome speakers. Take your surveys to local meetings and get them completed there. You will leave with the results. Use the survey questions to start group discussions and record what is said. Join local transportation committees and share your knowledge and insight. Take base maps to meetings and local diners and get people to draw their ideas.

Neighborhood newspapers garner a higher readership within their distribution area. Real estate firms send out newsletters to clients, ask them to give you some space. Local cable access may offer free training and air time. Local theater groups can produce videos and live performances. If multiple languages are spoken in your town, you need to find interpreters to work with you. Churches, special language newspapers, schools, social service providers, etc. know who is willing to volunteer to translate.

You can communicate with special needs people: those that are physically challenged, elderly, enrolled in welfare-to-work programs, low income, and welfare recipients. Day care centers, third shift employers, social service providers, medical centers and clinics will give your message to their clients.

The secret to making public involvement work when you have a limited budget and staff is to ***create excitement*** about what your agency does. You have to convince people that you need and want the knowledge that only they possess.

ASK

Ask everyone, “who else needs to know what we’re doing”. Every time you ask, you add names to your file. In networking the conventional wisdom is, “you are only 6 calls away from the person you need to talk to”. A corollary to this saying is, “Just remember, everyone’s a cousin”.

FOCUS GROUPS

You can hold focus groups when you have a limited budget. Ask market research firms, advertising councils, schools, and companies if they have personnel with focus group training. Ask one of these resources to train your staff to recruit participants, write questions, facilitate, and record focus groups. Train your secretaries, technicians, planners, and director. Everyone can have a new experience and become more involved in the “glamour” side of transportation planning and implementation. Remember, your staff has “cousins”.

When you want to talk with people who are not professional citizens, consider recruiting participants outside of grocery stores. This is a technique borrowed from political candidate campaigning. Choose the location of each recruiting site to match the area where your transportation plan and project are proposed. Once you have the names of participants, mix and match the individuals to achieve the balance of interest you desire in each discussion group. NOTE: It is important to ask permission from the business and/or property owner before you recruit on their premises.

Media Coverage

Media coverage, free, will vary. You already know this. Meet with the editorial writers and reporters to talk about the plan and project that is contemplated. Personal contact produces better results. It gives you a chance to ask media folks what they know and think. Local media people may be willing to help plan, write and implement a public awareness program, if you ask. Participate in events that the media will already be covering. Attend, enter, and sponsor teams and individuals in walkathons, Special Olympics, and benefit races. Home and garden and sports shows draw crowds, so set up your traveling display and talk to people about your work. You are a salesperson pitching the value of your product and your customer service.

Cable and television program directors and personalities will become interested when you show them how what you are doing relates to their personal interest. Call in shows, satellite town meetings, neighborhood closed cable networks, and local access programming, all reach larger audiences than most agency sponsored meetings. Drive-time helicopter reporters are a great way to target a transportation audience.

Public Involvement Advisory Groups

An advisory group can assist you in designing and implementing a public involvement process. They know people, meeting places, best meeting-times, and funding sources. Ask them to edit your written and verbal communications and delete jargon. Their help can be invaluable. Your advisory group exists to be your “friend in the community”. They know when the basketball rivalry game will be played and will tell you, “no meeting that night”. The members can introduce you to the community opinion leaders. In addition, they will alert you when plans/projects are politically sensitive. As a group committed to public involvement, they can lobby for increases in your budget.

The invisible opinion leaders are “key cousins” that you want to influence. Political campaign treasurers’ reports contain the names of many more “cousins” and offer insight into candidates’ supporters.

Forums

The League of Women Voters is a desirable sponsor because their organization’s mission is to be objective and to educate. Town meetings sponsored by local organizations are another avenue to engage the community in discussions of transportation problems, options, and solutions. These structured gatherings are less likely to become venting sessions. They do they offer a good opportunity to find out what the public thinks about your agency and it's work. Every meeting of this type is an opportunity to sign up volunteers to help you with your work.

Participating with other organizations minimizes the dollar cost of public involvement. Staff time spent on public involvement will increase because it will become an ongoing community relationship program. Staff work hours will change because nights and weekends are required to attend community meetings and events. Staff working relationships will change to coordinate with other agencies, and educate media and community leaders.

Creating forums for elected officials, where their constituents can participate, will underscore the value of your public involvement process and open budget doors. The bottom-line is that elected officials need to know when you arrange public meetings within their jurisdiction. Give them the opportunity to open the meeting. This is important when your agency serves multiple governmental entities. Ask elected and appointed officials to nominate people that would be assets to your process. They know the people in the community; they did get enough votes to win. Appointed and elected officials are good resources to identify foundations and other funding sources. A letter of support from these same officials is an important attachment to grant proposal submissions.

Attendance Mapping

When people sign in at a meeting, ask them to put a pin in an aerial or plat map to show where their business or residence is located. Before the meeting begins, you will know who is present and where they work and live. You will see quickly where you need to extend your outreach. This map can be useful when you present your plan/project at a public hearing. You might want to show the locations where you have met with community groups. It will help you see that you have covered the territory. A visual reference reassures public officials that you have been in touch with their constituents. This is a low cost way to show where you have been working in the community. Take it to meetings, display it in the lobby, and keep it moving so more people see it. People love maps, especially when they can locate their house or business.

Transit Plans and Projects

Transit operators are in daily contact with transportation consumers. The driver can be especially helpful in letting people know about route change meetings and corridor studies. This may require the cooperation of a union, where one exists, and may require providing pay for the extra hours. Transit drivers have been known to attend community meetings on their own time. And, they have a wealth of observations to share about traffic, bottlenecks, and infrastructure problems. Ask for free transit advertising space. Hire work-study students and interns to conduct telephone and on-board ridership surveys. The hourly pay scale will be lower than the hourly rate charged by most consultants.

Resistance

“If these techniques are so great, why isn’t everyone using them?”

Control. At least the perception of having control, prevents many agency people from reaching out to community people. There is a basic fear of letting “outsiders”, “others”, and non-transportation planners and engineers contribute to the work. After all, "Decisions have to be made that only the properly trained staff have the knowledge to make." This attitude too often limits the quality of public involvement and the quality of the product.

Citizens do not want bad planning. They do want to be part of the decision making process. They have information and ideas that are worth heeding. You have a choice: hear what people have to say up-front and out-front OR hear them in a public hearing, after you spend "all that money". This paper is intended to give you ideas that can keep the cost of public involvement at a minimum. It is intended to convince you that public involvement is fun and exciting. It is intended to persuade you that **PEOPLE** are your best resource.

Author's Note

I have used successfully every technique and suggestion included in this paper, at least once in 28 years of public involvement fun. Please challenge, inquire, and share your experiences with me. Together we can write a reference book on how to have fun and deliver effective public involvement when you have a modest budget.

If I can help you,

ASK.