

Defusing Those Hot-Button Issues

John Berkich

The more the merrier. That's my bias when it comes to citizen participation. That said, when emotions run high, meetings can be anything but merry. Few citizens are involved in issues; most, if they are engaged at all, are involved in an issue that has hit their particular "hot button." Perhaps it's a zoning change in their neighborhood, a new signal proposed for a nearby intersection, or a sewer project that is close to home. It's at that hot-button moment that citizen involvement kicks into hyperspeed and emotions turn intense. The result, if a hearing or other public session is called, can be "the meeting from hell."

It seems to me that the key to keeping the lid on emotions is to encourage communication and dialogue with as much of the population as possible and to involve as many citizens as possible in strategic planning on issues of the future. The burden is on those of us in local government management to be proactive in steering the communications process, to develop the dialogue and involvement so critical to sound local government management.

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Types of Meetings

According to the February 1996 *PM* article “What We Have Here Is a Failure to Communicate,” authors Michele Frisby and Monica Bowman have found several factors that contribute to citizen noninvolvement or apathy in local government processes. To sum up these factors, the article cited remarks made by Daniel Yankelovich, chairman of DYG, Inc.—a consulting firm with public sector clients across the United States—in a speech he delivered to the National Civic League’s 100th National Conference on Governance. Yankelovich found that folks stay at home, rather than participate, because:

- They feel shut out of the process.
- The ways the issues are framed do not connect with their lives.
- No one at city hall seems to be listening, and there’s an absence of two-way discussion.
- There is nowhere to go to express their opinions.
- Special-interest groups seem to be the ultimate decisionmakers on issues.
- The big business of political campaigns turns them off.
- The negative media focus is equally discouraging.
- Local government seems to be typified by inaction and self-serving agendas.
- Leaders seem to avoid issues, use “government talk,” and fail to tell the truth.

The feeling is that, generally, public officials closet themselves away from the public.

In March 1995, ICMA developed a community research survey and mailed it to some 5,000 randomly selected citizens in the United States; similar surveys were administered to 3,000 elected officials and 2,500 appointed managers. The survey was augmented by two focus groups in ICMA’s Northwest and Southwest regions. Impressions of the local government process seemed to repeat some interesting themes:

Working Meeting. These meetings focus on an agenda of work to be accomplished; are called for a specific purpose; have designed attendance (by invitation only); and should involve no more than 12 attendees.

Open Meeting. This kind of meeting is advertised and is run by a chairman, with the audience participating on invitation, at a particular point in the agenda, or at will.

Forum. This format is designed to air certain issues, to hear different points of view, and to shed light on a subject but not necessarily to make any decisions. A forum is advertised widely. Certain interests can make presentations, and the media are invited.

Public Mass Meeting. The meeting is announced to generate opposition or to demonstrate support or concern about a particular issue. People can simply make the comments they want to make.

Public Hearing. Public hearings are extremely important, but too much is expected of them, and they often hinder the planning process. They are poor techniques for obtaining citizen input because they are perfect settings for confrontation and conflict. Most people tend to be overwhelmed by the sophisticated and official-looking information and presentations and are intimidated by the ways in which these are staged.

Open House. At this kind of meeting, displays are on exhibit, and citizens are able to ask questions one-on-one. There is no presentation or staged format to the meeting, either to inform or to comment. This format can be effective in dealing with controversial issues.

Town Meeting. This is a format in which officials meet with a small group of citizens to talk about issues and answer questions.

Samoan Circle. In this type of meeting, there is no moderator. Chairs are arranged in a circle and are limited in number. People standing outside the circle cannot speak until they are seated around the table; and the meeting continues until everyone has had a chance to speak. Samoan circles can be used successfully in extremely controversial cases.

- The government is far too complex and complicated.
- There is a lack of unbiased and reliable information on how government works.
- Citizens organize around one issue, and once that issue is resolved, they disappear.
- Citizens see no reason to get involved in day-to-day affairs if things are running smoothly.
- Government responsiveness is sporadic and inconsistent.

Taking Stock

Even if a mechanic has great tools, the tools are useless unless the mechanic knows what the problem is. So identification of the problem becomes priority number one in bringing about effective citizen participation. Is a high-voltage line of concern to one section of the community? A new road in one part of town? Or a housing assistance policy with community-wide ramifications?

A tool developed by Hans Bleiker of

Toolbox for Managers and Assistants: Dealing Effectively with Citizens

The following is a partial list of tools that may be used in different ways to engage and educate citizens.

Public-Access Television

- Live and taped coverage of council, board, committee, and commission meetings.
- During production of the manager's or mayor's report, regular television discussion of current issues.
- On a council or board program, a discussion with the mayor or board member(s).
- Government-generated information programs (tourism, health issues, public safety tips, and the like).
- Live call-in shows featuring elected or appointed officials.
- Live shows during community emergencies (storms, floods, fires, earthquakes).
- Interactive opinion surveys.
- Meeting agendas, with explanations published on the cable bulletin board.

Radio

- Monday-morning interview shows with the manager and/or mayor.
- Call-in shows on news or talk radio.
- Simulcasting with public-access television programs.
- Public service announcements.
- Appearances by staff or elected officials on non-news stations.

Print Media

- Press releases.
- Press conferences.
- Publication of meeting agendas with brief explanations.

- Publication of newsletters highlighting the progress of major projects and the strategic plan; manager's or mayor's letter to citizens; question-and-answer pieces; spotlights on different department functions and staff members; results of citizen/customer surveys.
- Guest columns.
- Regular meetings with reporters to discuss current issues and meeting agendas.

Community-Based Information/Education Programs

- Leadership training.
- Volunteer programs.
- Training for citizens in how to participate on boards and commissions.
- Speakers' bureau.
- A community/government profile fact booklet.
- A budget fact book summarizing services and financial information.
- Annual report.
- Citizen police academies.
- City Hall in the Mall, or other off-site program in neighborhoods for information and/or service delivery.

Proactive Public Relations

- Community-wide strategic planning process.
- Town hall meetings in different locations throughout the community.
- Community workshops on issues of interest to the average citizen (home improvement guidelines, growth, master plan and zoning, public safety).
- Focus groups.
- Public opinion surveys, conducted by mail or telephone, with

publicized results.

- Surveys in newspaper or newsletter to supplement statistically valid surveys.
- "How Are We Doing" questionnaires in local government buildings to measure service.
- Staff and council attendance at neighborhood and community meetings.

Internet

- E-mail box for public comments, questions, and answers.
- Access to code, permitting, and licensing information on-line.
- Chat rooms on different issues, monitored by staff.
- Application and payment for services through the Internet (licenses, fines).
- Interconnected home pages.
- E-mail addresses directly reaching elected officials, manager, other staff.
- Surveys, with publicized results.

Telephone

- On-hold messages that give information on local government services.
- Pre-recorded hotlines on construction projects and traffic issues, with meeting and agenda information.
- Automated phone system for information on different topics 24 hours a day.
- Fax-on-demand forms for frequently asked questions.
- Broadcast faxing of agenda and other information to groups of interested citizens.
- Hotlines that record messages from citizens on public safety issues or concerns.

the Institute for Participatory Management that has been helpful in Carson City is to make a list that answers four questions:

1. Who is potentially affected by the issue, either directly or indirectly?
2. Are there some people who won't be affected but think they will be?
3. Who else needs or wants to be involved for other reasons?
4. What can the city do to really understand the interests these people have?

After our staff in Carson City has addressed these questions, they remind themselves of our two basic premises. The city wants (1) to show that government uses its power to help rather than to ignore or harm citizens *and* (2) to incorporate citizen input into public decision making.

Also before using any citizen participation tools, our staff has seen to it that a framework for communicating with the community is in place. Relationships with local media outlets must be manageable and effective before productive, interactive communication with citizens can take place. Carson City uses weekly television and radio programs to discuss topical issues and to communicate a continuous message. And we also use media advertising to solicit citizen input on major undertakings.

Spread the Word Honestly

Two years ago, Carson City worked with the Tony Nielssen Group in an effort to determine community tastes in design guidelines or standards. The media were used not only to communicate information about the process but also to give citizens detailed information on meetings and what could be expected at those meetings.

The response was tremendous; 250 people attended a workshop at our community center, and another 250 participated in survey work through a live broadcast on public-access television. The results were published in the

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final report issued to the board of supervisors and the community. Community standards warranted community participation.

More recently, more than 30 focus groups participated in a community-wide strategic planning process, followed by a town hall meeting that led to more workshops and culminated in another town hall meeting . . . all of these steps getting plenty of publicity, with significant attention paid to the results. The strategic planning process has led to other communication steps. *Capital City Focus*, a six-page informational newsletter to the community that was developed by staff, now is published by the local newspaper and included as an insert. Editions are produced every other month.

In addition to first-run articles about city programs and services, we present a report card on the implementation of the recommendations that came out of the strategic planning process. We also publish a bilingual, bi-monthly newsletter, *La Voz*, which uses graphics to present budget and program information.

Our latest addition to our citizen participation toolbox is a semiannual citizen survey. The city works with the local university to gain assistance in statistics, sampling, and cross-tabulation. The survey is a mail-out instrument that has produced not only specific answers to questions but also several pages of comments that have touched on issues important to citizens but not included in the survey. This feedback will lead to better survey work for the next mail-out.

While workshops, town hall meetings, and surveys have improved the dialogue and raised the level of trust, our open house also has played a role in encouraging communication on controversial issues. It offers citizens a chance to look at visual presentations, review printed material, and visit one-on-one with staffers who are involved with such matters as mandatory sewer connection and freeway design.

Follow Through

If communication with citizens is to be effective, and if citizen participation is truly the goal, local government administrators must follow through. As managers, we must keep the process alive and demonstrate that comments and input were desired and noticed. This can be achieved by treating all residents with respect and following up on requests for action or information—even if our responses are not exactly what citizens desire. Most important, we must take time to listen.

Task forces, focus groups, quick responses to complaints or requests for assistance, continuity in survey work, regular dialogue with activists, and reminders to the community of the positive results of citizen input are all hallmarks of communities with a high level of trust in local government and a low level of cynicism.

Simply televising meetings and following the letter of the law on public hearings will fall short of meeting citizen expectations for government responsiveness and responsibility.

Carson City's efforts to communicate with and involve citizens have improved and strengthened our community. Voter participation is high, and surveys show that citizens feel informed and involved and that they see to a greater extent how government interacts with their lives. We are proud that they feel this way and proud to be weavers of the fabric that, in our opinion, makes our city an exceptional place to live and work. **END**

John Berkich is city manager of Carson City, Nevada.