

Running Effective Public Meetings

Public hearings are the most common venue for participation in local decisions regarding affordable housing initiatives and land-use proposals. The fact that hearings are required does not mean they will always be effective at resolving community concerns. The following may help you work effectively in this process.

Prepare for the hearings

Planning preparation may require two or more meetings with the entire development team, local proponents, and the municipal planning department and/or local officials. These meetings should be used to:

- coordinating all work toward getting the votes needed for approval
- building active community support for the proposal
- working through concerns of community members
- dealing with active opposition
- protecting all legal rights
- communicating to decision makers and the public

During preparation, it is also helpful to determine the following:

- the organization's reputation, capacity to attract broad community support for its work, and previous experience in dealing with local government, opponents, and the media
- any approvals required from the local government and the criteria and timeline for related decisions
- local government's current knowledge of and support for affordable housing, the organization's work, and the current proposal
- full analysis of the neighborhood surrounding the proposed site (history, problems, organizations, assets, etc.)
- likely concerns neighbors might have about the proposal, the neighborhood's experience with similar problems, and its potential for organized opposition
- potential legal issues associated with the development proposal, including the organization's legal rights
- the regional and local media's approach to the development

How and when to notify neighbors is one of the decisions made during this process. All timing issues are critical and should be decided after consultation with those most familiar with local politics and the specific neighborhood.

Make the meetings productive

Meetings that are clearly structured and well-run can go a long way toward eliciting public support, while loosely-run sessions can quickly get out of hand when emotions are involved.

- Guide participation by clearly describing the agenda, framing the issues, establishing ground rules for civility, and clarifying the process for the meeting at the outset.
- Add a Question & Answer session before or after the hearing or online to answer questions raised by the public that were not addressed at the hearing.
- Affirm what you have heard by asking clarifying or follow-up questions and by verbally or visually summarizing what has been said by each speaker.
- Consider a themed conversation, asking participants to stick with one theme at a time to enhance information sharing and reduce repetition.
- Try to uncover the underlying values that drive the feelings and opinions to clarify speakers' intents and interests and improve communication and understanding.
- Explain decisions clearly in light of the values that the decisions represent as a way to illuminate the reasons for making those choices.

HOUSING TOOLBOX

for Massachusetts Communities 

People who attend public hearings can be passionate, nervous, angry, frustrated, scared, confused, and uncertain about the issues, the hearing itself, or the possible outcomes. Emotions may run high. Conflicts among participants or between participants and officials may result. Decisions that reference common interests and shared values can enhance understanding and reduce conflict. Clear process, good listening, and acknowledging the input received will reduce the likelihood of hard feelings.

Make the meetings inclusive

Public hearings or meetings are often attended only by the "vocal few," and many stakeholders' voices are not heard. The following ideas can increase participation.

- In the materials you distribute ahead of time—translated as appropriate—explain the purposes and objectives of the hearing or public meeting and the subjects to be covered. Provide time and location details, as well as guidelines for participation.
- Provide early notice to public interest groups, businesses, neighborhood groups, and other stakeholders. Issue public notices in languages commonly used by community residents. Post notices on the agency and town Websites, as well as other places easily accessible to online users.
- Reach populations and communities that may be less involved in planning and development issues by using local and ethnic media to publicize hearings and meetings.
- Choose times and places that are convenient for all who might be expected to attend. Consider multiple meetings at different sites, times of day, and days of the week, perhaps co-sponsored by community groups, as a way to increase attendance.
- Use alternative engagement methods like CoUrbanize to reach those who may not usually attend public meetings or participate in the process.
- Use respected community intermediaries to educate communities with a particular interest in the proposed project but little experience on how to prepare for and participate in the public hearing process.
- Make translation services available as needed to ensure that all participants can understand and participate in hearings.
- Find a participant-friendly site with a physical setting that encourages participation and reduces feelings of distance between public officials and participants, and meet the needs of participants with disabilities.
- Ask toward the end of the hearing if those who have not yet spoken would like to do so.

Manage controversy

When there is controversy before a public hearing or meeting, support the developer and other advocates by constructively engaging opponents and working through legitimate concerns. You can also make resources available for mediation and stand up to opponents who are discriminating or acting in bad faith.

If controversy is expected at a hearing, request a briefing of the decision-making body by legal counsel on legal issues, such as anti-discrimination law. Set (and enforce) ground rules for a civil, reasoned discussion focused on legitimate, substantial concerns and solutions to community problems.