



Georgia Planning Officials Newsletter

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Approaches to Better Public Engagement

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There are many ways of engaging the public, including the following approaches. Perhaps you're already using some of them. While there are no fixed rules on what makes for effective public engagement, openness and creativity are staple ingredients.

Neighborhood-Based Planning.

One of the best ways to engage citizens in planning is by going out to their neighborhoods. Neighborhood-based planning is an old concept but is not used enough. While it may work best in municipalities which tend to have more distinct neighborhoods, rural areas can benefit as well, by identifying activity centers that target organized groups.

Developer Assisted Outreach.

Before a development plan is submitted, call on the applicant to engage in a reasonable, yet vigorous, public outreach campaign. Such engagement can lead to significant improvements to the development plan as the neighborhood becomes part of the design solution.

Technology and Graphics.

Advances in computer software continue to allow real life and what-if scenarios. It has been often said that a picture is worth a thousand words, and this is truer now than ever before. Audiences seem to be mesmerized by before/after visual presentations, and factual data that shows exciting or alarming trends through charts and graphs.

Websites.

The home page is still underutilized. Many are generic and difficult to navigate. A community's homepage offers one of the fastest growing tools for disseminating information and measuring results. It can be used to link to the latest news, solicit input through interactive surveys and also provide agendas and staff reports.

Pilot Project Planning.

Take an idea and put it into action by engaging a group of interested citizens as part of a planning experiment. For example, work out a deal with residents of a street or neighborhood to agree to a code enforcement sweep to address outstanding violations. After the sweep has been done, and every house been reviewed, educate each resident about code requirements without issuing any citations. Follow up in about 30 days to monitor their progress. Supplement the progress with financial and technical assistance packages.

Discovery Sessions.

When you discover or hear about interesting trends or activities—such as a newly revitalized row of historic homes or a burgeoning group of antiques businesses—have your staff schedule a discovery session with the movers and shakers behind the trend or activity. At the meeting, staff can discover if there are ways of providing support or serving as a catalyst for further activities.

Planners for a Day.

In order to get youth interested in what you do, embrace the fun practice of engaging primary and secondary school students in designing their ideal future community on top of a base map. After the final plans are finished, talk about planning and government, and answer their many questions. Allow them to present the results at one of the public meetings.

Public Involvement and Participation: Engaging the Public

The planning process is designed to include public participation, a key component in creating a plan that the community envisions. Public participation provides for an opportunity to bring citizens together to assist in decision-making for the future of a city, county or region.

Public participation also allows for dialogue between the citizens, local government staff and the elected and appointed officials. Viewpoints and preferences are established, while providing access to those who will have to implement them. This allows for quality discourse and discussion regarding growth and preservation issues.

In addition, public participation provides the opportunity to educate the public and increase their ability to understand the issues and even the planning process itself. The community is most qualified to inform planners of its own needs, and can provide insight that planning officials may not be aware of.

As a planning official, it is your role to represent the needs of the community. Through inclusive public involvement, you can determine what those needs are, and the order of their importance. This will allow you to make more informed decisions in your planning-related duties.

We want to hear from you! Please send us your thoughts, experiences and advice on being a Planning Official. E-mail or fax your submissions to Robbie Hayes at rhayes@atlantaregional.com or 404.463.3105