

## How to Improve Public Meetings

By Linda Mather

IAF-Certified Professional Facilitator and Assessor

**Public Hearings:** Synonymous with disruptive, noisy, a necessary evil.

**Community Input:** Synonymous with uninformed, resistance to change, self-serving.

Put the two together—**Public Hearings with Community Input**—and you have the recent town hall meetings on health care reform.

Public meetings are supposed to be an opportunity for the exchange of ideas, for sharing information as we seek to find the best solution, for elected officials to get the pulse of their constituents. Rather than thoughtful dialogue and an open and civil exchange of ideas, the health care reform meetings are often shouting matches, which literally are gauged by the volume and bombast of the participants.

Public meetings serve a fundamental part of our democracy. They should engage citizens in decisions that affect them. They should provide additional information to the decision makers. They should be courteous, with participants who listen to and respect each other and their leaders.

*Public meetings  
are opportunities  
to find  
collective wisdom  
and the best solutions.*

How can public hearings be made more productive for all concerned? For those in charge of calling these meetings, it is helpful to follow good meeting practices:

- **Ground Rules** – Certain television programs, where inappropriate behavior such as yelling, not listening, and interrupting is acceptable, have overshadowed appropriate behavior in groups. People no longer know how to listen and how to speak respectfully. Presenting a list of ground rules such as no one speaks for a second time until everyone has spoken once establishes the parameters of engagement. Most audience members will adhere and, if not, the facilitator has something to refer to as a way of managing the situation.
- **Agenda** – Define the goals of the meeting and the format for the meeting. Preparing the agenda gives you a sense of what can be accomplished and by whom. Sharing it at the meeting shows the group that you have given it thought and also gives the audience a sense of direction.

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- **Plan Ahead** – Spend some time deciding what you want to know, what you think the audience should know and how best to share that knowledge. For example, at a municipal meeting on street repaving as a mandate under the Clean Water Act, city officials did not mention the Act until an hour had been spent listening to citizens complain about the disruption to their streets. Had the officials started with a brief overview of the Act, the mandates therein, and the impact on the community, at least half of the complaints would have been made moot.
- **Provide the Right Information** – Some people will be driven more by values and emotion than hard information. Consider what information would be most helpful. Consider how best to package the information. For example, a town was willing to plant additional trees as part of a repaving effort. That willingness to provide the trees, labor, and initial care was lost because the arborist at the meeting didn't have any written information about the possible tree choices and their qualities. Having him talk about the trees without that basis of knowledge only frustrated the residents.
- **Consider Multimedia** – People respond to information differently. Some prefer to hear, some to see, etc. Make it a point to use multiple media formats to present information, when possible. Use graphics to make information appealing.

Engaging the public can be a messy process but it doesn't have to be a useless process. There are a variety of approaches and groups that have worked with controversial issues for a long time. And there are the basic meeting techniques described above. Conveners and participants should remember that the process helps everyone to find the collective wisdom in the group.