

# Public Meeting SOS: Navigating minefields and fending off organized hostility

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McMenamins Kennedy School, Portland

## Workshop Summary

Attended by 103 professionals from throughout Oregon and Washington, this workshop produced outcomes and observations from a panel of experienced practitioners and every attendee working in small groups. Attendees came for tips to deal with passionate stakeholders and to create exit and re-entry strategies for public meetings. “Expect the best, but prepare for the worst,” sums up the range of approaches that were discussed. Finally, the group agreed that messy meetings might not be a bad thing.

Jeanne Lawson said, “You need to genuinely care about every person. Public meetings can really change the direction of an agency.” Jim Gladson said, “It’s all about relationships,” and strongly advised against a town hall format, recommending one-on-one and small meetings instead. Tony Faast noted that public agencies shouldn’t be surprised when they set the stage for a public brawl and then it happens. Sheri Wantland suggested that bad behavior is avoided with a well-planned stakeholder engagement infrastructure.

Collectively, the group concluded: Be prepared. Know the stakeholders, the topic and potential concerns. Be sure all staff and consultants know their roles. Get agreement on the ground rules. Be clear on the purpose of the meeting, how decisions will be made, the role of the public and how their input will be used.

**On the topic of preparing for a meeting:** Ask for help; go in as a team (project managers, engineers, communicators, etc.). Commit to the public process, pre-, during and post-meeting. Commit to ongoing, long term communications. Anticipate the tough questions; rehearse with staff on how to respond. Prepare the decision makers. Keep decision-makers informed and up to date; keep working to communicate with them. Make sure they understand the ground rules. Provide them tactics and signals for dealing with conflict. Anticipate questions, understand different perspectives and hot button issues before the event, ensure that the process is culturally appropriate and sensitive. Anticipate "off-topic" concerns of public and invite resource staff from other agencies/organizations to be on hand to answer these questions. People don't distinguish between agencies and who will provide an answer/solution to their concerns. Contact known groups/individuals prior to meetings to understand issues, concerns and priorities

Clearly, public meetings are not your main tool. About 95% of the time, avoid town hall format. Plan issues, stakeholders, room arrangement, environment, set the stage. Seat people so they can see each other (semi-circle, horseshoe). Provide a meeting space that is open and welcoming. Better alternatives are small groups, going door-to-door, sub-committees and other communication formats.

**Tips for managing the process included:** Stress that the public is a member of the team; clarify how they will affect the decision. Facilitate to maintain order. Acknowledge passion and feelings at the start of the meeting. Define public’s role up front to reduce frustration. Lay out the decision-making process. Establish ground rules

and enforce them. Be clear on the role of the decision-makers. Be honest; it's okay to say, "I don't know, but will find out."

Show compassion and be respectful. Allow venting. Acknowledge past mistakes. Define community role and input. Designate a person to intervene. Understand different ethnic groups. Provide good cookies. Bring field staff who are seen and known in the community. End with a summary and next steps. Let the community own the meeting. Partner with someone from the community to host the meeting. Establish staff roles. Prepare tactics to take a break if things get out of hand. Ask up front, "What's your worst fear?" Offer to stay after meeting for as long as it takes to get to a person's issues. Shut down the meeting to regroup if it becomes uncivil; ask for volunteers to devise another approach.

**When people get difficult:** Live with it, let it play out for a reasonable time. Let the group self police. Don't provide the space for a performance or grandstanding. Start with information presentation then break into small group discussions. It's as important to know who is not in the room as who is. Know who you need to work with to get more stakeholder involvement. Remind that this is a public process and that comments of all concerned will be included in deliberation of decision-makers. Ensure that public understands how the process works and where they fit in.

If a large crowd shows up, be prepared to change format (contingency planning). Have staff circulate with sign-in sheets, comment cards, roster for giving public comment. Have staff outside main room greeting people and bringing a caring face to the proceedings. Work with decision-makers to allow for flexibility in format/process. If there is an unexpected turnout or hostile response to proposal, develop a "problem statement" and then transition to a "listening session", inviting people to give comments, ideas or concerns.

**Much of the workshop focused on personal conduct and reassurances.** You have the wisdom. Have confidence in yourself, but don't be overly confident. Be fair, open and honest. If we're not playing fair, it shows. Demonstrate integrity. Model good behavior. Protect people's emotions. Avoid being defensive. When attacked, pause and wait; often the group will rescue you. Do not be an impersonal representative of a powerful agency. Be transparent. Avoid detachment, being an outsider. Understand yourself first. Don't take it personally. Advocate for participation, not the outcome. Go in motivated to listen with respect and expect good results while having a game plan for opposition.

Start with key messages. Manage information well because poorly presented information produces anxiety. Follow the rules, provide clarity for all. Provide balancing information to counter hostility or misinformation. Provide many ways to comment. Teach technical staff to speak plain English. Mark documents as DRAFT or "or discussion only" to make it clear the outcome is not a done deal. Provide subject and content experts. Share other stakeholder comments; provide handouts that show other stakeholder viewpoints on the issue. State known concerns so they know you're aware of the issues. Admit past mistakes. Acknowledge if your agency has not responded well in past situations, but are now committed to listening/responding to public input. Translate technical information and ensure that all information is easily understood and accessible. Follow-up with additional information if answers are not available during meeting, even for "off topic" questions.

**Suggestions for dealing with outright hostility and strong emotions:** We are facing organized, prescriptive resistance; reference Rocking the Town Hall Best Practices. If you are attacked, pause and the group will save you. Humanize yourself, be warm. Be culturally sensitive. Bring partners to deal with parallel problems and concerns. Strong facilitation, calm assertiveness. Accept that there will be angry people. Expect and prepare for confrontation. Ask, "What do you want to tell us?" Make sure they know you care. Reframe the question or comment. Appoint someone to handle the person and help them. Allow them to vent, but keep the balance between hearing them and moving on for the rest of the group. Ask the others, "Do you want to hear more?" Let organized hostility play out their hand in the belief that others will see it for what it is. Don't use trite active listening phrases such as "what I hear you saying is . . ."

**Asked what provokes hostility, the group had many answers.** Fear, change, distrust. Lack of information. A belief that decisions have already been made. Power and control issues. Activists representing their own interests. Some grandstand to increase membership in their organization. Feeling powerless, uninformed, not feeling heard. Basic values are in conflict (pro/anti topic at hand). Displaced anger. Individuals or group has issue that has not been addressed or for which there may not be an appropriate venue for discussion. Elevating exposure to a strongly-held minority opinion. Meetings seen as a means to be heard, understood and perhaps influence a different outcome/decision. Passionate individuals who are "compelled" to speak up at every opportunity.

Difficult and challenging meetings are not necessarily unsuccessful. Remember, you are being paid and they are not; in today's economy people are in survival mode and are more defensive. Some people will be under the influence of drugs or alcohol; some people will be mentally unstable. The "neutral" facilitator is a myth; at the very least you must advocate for an effective process. All stakeholders are not equal; the most impacted people should have more say in the outcome. Is the public meeting dead? No, but it's got a fever. We have trained the public to participate; they have more experience than we do.

Using the baseball game analogy, we give them the parking lot, the stadium, the bleachers, the field, the lights and more to stage a brawl and then we're amazed when they do. Public meetings can really change the direction of an agency. The community is not elected officials and not a statistically valid sampling to be representative. The public process is there to inform their decision-making. It's inappropriate to relinquish their duty, and inappropriate for citizens to usurp it. Worst experiences: using children to provoke strong emotions; someone saying, "What are you gonna lie to me about today?" and having a pizza delivered in the middle of the meeting.

**Pondering the future of public participation:** Social media, online dialogues, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc. provide open dialogue. Use technology as value added, not in place of in person meetings. Our experience with online media is that the perception of aggressive users is inaccurate. Websites, mediated blog now gather ideas for charged issues. Some tools draw attention to meetings, notes, use Twitter to update. It's what our generation uses to communicate. Break down the anonymity of online comments; make them use real names. Transparency in government, partnerships and collaboration. Prescribed public involvement processes from the federal government are now out of date and need to be refreshed. Federal agencies are mandated to post comments on line. We need to "sell" good process to decision makers; insist on more than meeting the minimum requirements of the law.

**Attendee questions for the panel - “how to”:** Reverse misplaced bad perceptions. De-fuse a hostile, distrustful crowd. Channel passionate people into a unified, positive focus. Deal with people who see ground rules as censorship. Create space for divergent opinions. Make it clear that yelling at the government is not acceptable behavior. Communicate their input is valuable even if they don't see an impact; deal with their frustration. Handle your integrity being attacked publicly. Deal with people who don't believe the technical experts. Avoid having too many staff at meetings. Educate people on how to most effectively participate in the process. Convince managers that a different approach is needed. Convince “betters” that untimely public outreach can be worse than no public outreach. Recover from/prevent angry group that goes to the decision maker and gets capitulation. Respectfully shut people down. Deal with fear on volatile subjects (public safety and health). Make clear what decisions the public can affect and what they cannot influence. Channel sincere concern and energy that is not relevant to the current issue. Deal with irrational anger. Defuse tension. Channel interest and passion into constructive input. Establish personal relationships when there isn't much time. Learn new techniques and methods of successful public participation. Break bad news; tell people a decision they won't like has been made. Prepare emotionally, not take it personally. Stay objective, maintain impartiality if project manager is facilitator. Anticipate the issues, do the stakeholder homework Optimally organize groups for best results.

**Attendee questions for the panel - “what to do”and other unanswerables:**  
When the public wants more participation but some elected officials advocate cutting back due to budgets. ~ When, in spite of your best efforts, opponents hire attorneys to help stop the project. ~ Why are town hall style meetings so bad? ~ What could town hall organizer have done differently? ~ Can you change minds at a public meeting? ~ What type of meetings work best in which situations? ~ What makes a meeting successful?

### **Skill building ideas and additional resources**

Observe other public meetings ~ Learn from experience ~Debrief the meeting ~  
Peer discussions ~ Rehearse with actors

See the IAP2 Techniques Toolbox for many alternatives to public meetings at  
[www.iap2.org](http://www.iap2.org)

National Coalition for Deliberative Democracy [www.thataway.org](http://www.thataway.org)

Local American Red Cross offers media interview training

Adobe Connect: 2-way communication, web-cam, polling, white board, etc.

Rocking the Town Halls – Best Practices

<http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/documents/2009/08/memo-details-co-ordinated-anti-reform-harrasment-strategy.php?page=1>

## **Top 10 To Do's for Public Meetings by Sheri Wantland**

- 1. Investigate all issues (thoroughly research invitees, concerns, etc.)**
- 2. Set the stage (carefully choose location, arrange the room)**
- 3. Rehearse roles (leader, "cop", hard questions, placement, signals)**
- 4. Greet guests (graciously, as if it were your home)**
- 5. Airtight agenda (posted in plain sight, to the minute if necessary)**
- 6. Go over ground rules (get group agreement, then stick to 'em)**
- 7. Express empathy (show it, say it, "I see why some people are upset.")**
- 8. Resist resistance (stay soft, not defensive)**
- 9. Be fair, open and honest (even if you shut it down and regroup)**
- 10. Serve sweets**

### Good concepts for public involvement

Peter Drucker, greatest management teacher: be mission driven, open to change  
What's the goal? What's the best way to meet that goal?

Peter Sandman, risk communications guru: Risk = Hazard + Outrage  
Facts don't matter much when people are afraid. Outrage is fear-based.

Robert Fulghum, author of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*  
"Play fair. Don't hit people. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody."