

# TIPS & TRICKS

## FOR ENGAGING PUBLIC MEETING PARTICIPANTS

Have you ever been faced with the daunting task of hosting a public meeting? Have you ever wondered what it is you can do to help comfortably draw information out of the public related to the watershed in which you are working? This handout includes some tried and true methods to set the stage for productive public meeting dialogue as well as a few other things that we think are good ideas.

### Pre-Meeting

- Have all meeting props and the room arranged before meeting attendees begin to arrive. This demonstrates that the meeting is organized, and that you value the meeting attendees' time.
- Greet meeting attendees as they walk in the door, mingle, and be friendly, cheerful, and professional. Introduce yourself, and ask their names.
- Set the meeting at a suitable date and time for the target attendance group.
- Start the meeting on time! Be ready to stick to the meeting time limit if there is one.

### Refreshments

- Providing refreshments is a great way to relax a meeting atmosphere and help facilitate initial meeting conversation.
- Some studies have shown that coffee improves energy and mental performance. The caffeine in coffee can help improve focus, attention, mood, and energy.

### Room Arrangement

- People tend to feel more comfortable sitting behind tables. If the group is small enough use a round table. Or arrange tables so that they face each other. If tables are not available, attempt to arrange rows of chairs in an arc or semi-circle, so that they face each other as well.
- Do not use a podium or stand behind a table. This creates a barrier between you and the meeting attendees. Move around as you speak.
- If the meeting is going to have a large attendance, be prepared to have a microphone for the meeting facilitator.
- Have props on display. If it is specifically a watershed meeting, a map of the watershed is a must. Other things that may be useful or of interest to watershed meeting attendees include brochures on best management practices (BMPs), septic system maintenance brochures, benthic macroinvertebrates collected in from local streams, jars showing different soil types (sand, silt, clay) suspended in water if discussing soils and total suspended solids, etc. The point is to help people visualize the topics you are discussing.
- Have a large flip chart where public concerns and comments can be written for everyone to see.

### **Meeting Introductions**

- A room full of strangers can intimidate many people and suppress good discussion. Do what you can to help public meeting attendees get to know one another. Start by introducing yourself and explaining the purpose of the meeting. Ask meeting attendees to introduce themselves and briefly explain what motivated them to attend the public meeting.
- It may be helpful to have people wear nametags. This way you can address them by name later in the meeting. At the least, the meeting facilitator should wear a nametag, for the benefit of meeting attendees.

### **Ice Breakers**

- Start with a game of watershed trivia. Have a variety of questions so that everyone including children should be able to answer something. Offer a prize such as a candy bar to the person or group with the most correct answers.
- Offer to pay the first person to speak up and explain their relationship to the watershed or what motivated them to come the meeting. Give them “A penny for their thoughts.”
- Give everyone a hypothetical situation such as being given \$1,000,000 and 10 acres of land in the watershed and ask how they would develop/use the land and how it would influence water quality. Give an example to get things started.
- In general, try to integrate some fun into the meeting especially at the beginning.

### **Meeting Language**

- Keep your vocabulary simple! Those of us well versed in scientific language can easily alienate, bore, and confuse those less familiar with our language. Explain things in a manner that your grandmother would understand. For more information on this topic consult:

<http://waterwordsthatwork.com>

Keep in mind that in one study less than 50% of the general population could guess the correct definition of watershed out of 4 choices. And, only 16% of the general population could guess the correct definition of non-point source pollution out of 4 choices. This is less than guessing at random (Eric Eckl, Water Words That Work, 03-25-11).

- Our primary goal should be to empower citizens that they can make a difference for clean water. This is far more important than educating them on the language and technicalities of water quality. Continually encourage meeting attendees using simple buzz words such as they can “work together and do their part to make a difference for pollution control, wildlife conservation, and nature protection to keep their family and children healthy and safe as well as future generations.”
- Ask questions of the audience throughout your presentation. Be prepared to paraphrase and give examples if the audience does not get your point. Do not call on the same person every time. Try to get everyone involved.
- Ask rhetorical questions.

## Public Feedback

- Not everyone likes to speak up in public. Provide comment cards and writing utensils so that people can submit comments and/or questions both anonymously and with their name and contact information.
- Do not require meeting attendees addressing the audience stand to speak. Let them do what feels natural.
- Some meeting attendees may have microphone phobia. Do not force meeting attendees to use a microphone when asking questions or contributing to discussion. But, have it ready to use if necessary. Also, keep in mind that some meeting attendees may like to talk a little more than necessary when they are given a microphone. It may be a good idea to retain possession of the microphone as the meeting facilitator and repeat any comments from the public into the microphone, so that all meeting attendees can hear.
- Be cautious not to belittle *any* public comments or concerns. Do not let anyone else belittle someone else's concerns or comments.
- Offer genuine positive feedback to comments/concerns and show appreciation to the person for sharing. Do not be generic merely stating, "good comment." Explain why it is a good comment.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. Attempt to find the appropriate answer or person to answer the question after the meeting and provide the meeting attendee with the appropriate information.
- Paraphrase and repeat back meeting attendees' comments in order to ask them if you understand correctly.
- Have someone record meeting attendees' comments/concerns on a flip chart that everyone can see. This helps to ensure that the comments are being appropriately documented. It may also help more boisterous meeting attendees keep their comments reasonable and to the point.
- Sometimes it may help to have someone on your team hidden in the audience or even an obvious note taker prepared to ask the first question. A lot of people do not like to be the first to speak out, but will gladly enter a dialogue once it has been started.
- Try to have public meeting attendees brainstorm solutions to the concerns that have been presented.
- Give everyone three post-it notes or stickers to stick next to the top three topics that are most important to them and have been recorded on a flip chart. This lets everyone feel as if they have had a hand in making watershed decisions. It also helps you as the facilitator understand which topics may be the most productive to focus on.
- If you know that a lot of questions or concerns may arise surrounding one or a couple particular topics, it may be beneficial to have a representative from an organization that deals with the topic be on hand to answer questions such as someone from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that works with endangered species or the Indiana Department of Environmental Management which regulates impacts to wetlands and streams. (Note: Singling out the presence of regulatory personnel is not recommended for a first meeting in a watershed. This should be done at a subsequent meeting or workshop.)

- It may be beneficial to have people from several walks of life/professions briefly talk at the beginning of the meeting about their experiences in the watershed and why watershed management is important to them. Public meeting attendees may identify with one particular speaker and feel more comfortable sharing with them.
- If the meeting is large have people break into smaller groups for brainstorming sessions or for working on a specific task. Make sure everyone introduces themselves once again in the small group setting! Later reconvene as a larger group with one spokesperson from each small group contributing to the discussion.
- If nobody is talking try to inject a little bit of humor such as: “Wow, I guess we shouldn’t have had this meeting at night. It seems everybody at here is half asleep.” Suggest they get up and stretch, grab another cookie, etc.
- Do not let anyone person dominate the conversation. Politely thank them for their contribution and change the topic.

### **Meeting Attire**

- Do not dress to impress. Dress cleanly and professionally, but keep it relatively casual if that is what you anticipate from meeting attendees. If the meeting facilitator is dressed in a business suit and the audience is dressed much more casually they will be less likely to speak.

### **Meeting Location**

- Hold the meeting in a non-threatening place such as a community center, library, church, or senior center. Try to avoid holding meetings in government buildings as they may give the impression of an authority overseeing the meeting or introduce an element of politics associated with the meeting topic.

### **Meeting Structure**

- Varying the structure of meetings can attract new people as well as keep things interesting for regular attendees.
- If a group has been meeting for awhile and tends to always sit in the same place or with same people, try mixing up the seating arrangement. Sometimes a new location can influence people to interact in new ways.
- Vary the types of meetings: open houses, meetings about hot topics (ex. *E. coli*), meetings to get feedback, interesting guest speakers, meetings that include presentations from various stakeholder groups
- Vary meeting times
- Try to keep a diverse group of regular meeting attendees that are representative of the stakeholder groups in the area in which you are working including residents, private sector personnel, government personnel, etc.

### **Post Meeting**

- Generate meeting minutes for distribution to help attendees comprehend the meeting progress.