

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN STRATEGY



A general outline for how a community may organize
its public participation plan



INTRODUCTION

A public participation plan (P³) is essential for outlining how the public will be engaged throughout the planning and development process. The plan allows for interactions to share and receive information in ways that are adjusted in content and intensity to the size and scope of the project at hand. In addition, the P³ acts as a tool for accountability and transparency, requiring a municipality to often seek public input as well as record and share the results of the various methods. Furthermore, the public participation plan conserves resources in the long-run by evaluating the most valuable ways to engage the public. The document is updated to reflect success and areas in need of improvement, leaving a strong culture of public involvement, despite municipal turnover.

The Redevelopment Ready Communities® (RRC) program, administered by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), embraces open government with clear policies and procedures. Part of obtaining certification is to have a public participation plan in active use. The following information acts as a general outline for how a community may organize its public participation plan. Each section contains a brief explanation for the purpose of that section and a few examples or ideas to consider.

RRC staff and advisory council find the approach described in this strategy to be very helpful when preparing public participation plans. However, the material in this strategy is advisory and does not constitute official MEDC policy or guidance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Participation goals and objectives.....	4
State regulations on public participation	5
Key stakeholders.....	7
The communication toolbox	8
Strategies for outreach	10
Communicating results	11
Evaluating the effectiveness of participation efforts	12
Closing	13
Appendix.....	14
Community event satisfaction survey.....	15
Internal public participation evaluation	16

PARTICIPATION GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The public participation plan (P³) should include a section that describes what the municipality seeks to accomplish through the creation of the plan. This allows all involved in the creation of the document to come to consensus on what successful public participation looks like. The following are examples of goals and objectives of a P³:

- **Solicit public participation in each phase of the master planning process.** Throughout the multiple phases of the master planning process, extensive participation components are and will continue to be incorporated to foster public participation. Proactive participation denotes early and continuous involvement in important policy or project decisions before they are finalized. There are many opportunities for the public to play a role in shaping short- and long-term needs, solutions and funding priorities. The earlier the public is involved in the process, the greater the opportunity to influence important land-use decisions.
- **Seek broad identification and representative involvement of all residents of the community.** The diverse characteristics and needs of residents require different communication and outreach techniques.
- **Utilize effective and equitable avenues for distributing information and receiving comments.** There are many techniques and mechanisms available to ensure that a diverse public is well-informed and able to play a role in the planning process. Recognizing that no single technique or mechanism will work in all cases, it is up to the municipality to consider the special communication needs of the public and use the best approaches to accomplish this objective.
- **Provide educational materials and design participation initiatives that will support and encourage effective participation.** Effective participation in the decision-making process requires an understanding of land-use issues and the framework for making local investment decisions. Planning professionals and officials need to be well-versed in and employ visualization techniques that optimize public understanding of issues and concepts. Visualization techniques can be especially helpful with specific sites or areas of re-development.
- **Maintain and develop staff expertise in all aspects of participation.** This includes techniques for bridging language, cultural and economic differences that affect participation; ways to convey issues and information in meaningful ways to various cultural groups; and means for ensuring equitable representation for all segments of the population and sectors of the economy.
- **Support and encourage continuous improvement in the methods used to meet the public need for information and involvement.** Public information and involvement methods are continually evolving. The municipality is committed to seeking new and innovative ways to engage and keep the public involved throughout the process.
- **Record results of public engagement and recount these results back to the public.** To properly capture the concerns, priorities and vision of the public, the municipality will develop a system to track the various techniques and mechanisms of public input. To maintain transparency and consistency, the municipality will develop a method for sharing public participation with the public.

STATE REGULATIONS ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The P³ should include laws concerning public participation to establish the bare-minimum public participation requirements. The following is sample language:

“Along with the desire to include a diversified public in its planning processes, the municipality relies on state statutes to help guide its participation activities.”

Michigan Open Meetings Act

In accordance with the Michigan Open Meetings Act (PA 267 of 1976), the municipality will hold meetings in the **xxx** building located at address, which is accessible to the general public.

The public will be notified within 10 days of the first meeting of a public body in each calendar or fiscal year; the body will publicly post a list stating the dates, times and places of all its regular meetings at its principle office. (If a public body does not have a principle office, the notice would be posted in the office of the county clerk for a local public body or the office of the Secretary of State for a state public body.)

If there is a change in schedule, within three days of the meeting in which the change is made, the public body will post a notice stating the new dates, times and places of regular meetings.

For special and irregular meetings, public bodies will post a notice indicating the date, time and place at least 18 hours before the meetings.

Note: A regular meeting of a public body which is recessed for more than 36 hours, can only be reconvened if a notice is posted 18 hours in advance.

Public bodies will hold emergency sessions without a written notice or time constraints if the public health, safety or welfare is severely threatened and if two-thirds of the body's members vote to hold the emergency meeting.

Any citizen can request that public bodies put them on a mailing list so that they are notified in advance of all meetings by contacting the following: **XXXXX**

Michigan Planning Enabling Act

In accordance with the Michigan Planning Enabling Act (PA 33 of 2008) the following parties will be notified via first class mail, personal delivery or electronic mail by the planning commission (or legislative body if no planning commission exists) of the intent to plan and request the recipient's cooperation and comment:

- The county in which the municipality is located
- The regional planning commission for the region in which the municipality is located, if there is no county planning commission for the county in which that municipality is located. If there is a county planning commission, the municipal planning commission may consult with the regional planning commission but is not required to do so
- The county planning commission, or if there is no county planning commission, the county board of commissioners for the county in which that municipality is located
- Each public utility company, railroad company, and public transportation agency owning or operating a public utility, railroad, or public transportation system within the local unit of government, and any government entity that registers its name and mailing address for this purpose with the planning commission
- If the master plan will include a master street plan, the county road commission and the state transportation department

After the draft master plan has been submitted to the legislative body for review and approval for distribution, the draft plan will be submitted to the previously listed entities for review.

Before approving a proposed master plan, a planning commission will hold not less than one public hearing on the proposed master plan. The hearing will be held after the expiration of the deadline for comment as outlined in the act.

The planning commission will give notice of the time and place of the public hearing not less than 15 days before the hearing by publication in a newspaper of general circulation within the local unit of government. The planning commission will also submit notice of the public hearing by first class mail, personal delivery or electronic mail to the previously listed entities for review.

After the adoption of the master plan, a planning commission may publish and distribute copies of the master plan or of any report, and employ other means of publicity and education.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The P³ should identify important groups that can assist and enhance the public participation process, as well as identify groups that are not often at the visioning table. This section can describe the role that groups have played in the past and opportunities for them to participate in the future. The creation of the P³ is an advantageous time to identify contacts within organizations or groups and solidify partnerships in the public participation process.

The following are often important entities:

- Chamber of Commerce
- Commercial business owners
- Community's largest employers
- Downtown Development Authority (DDA), Principal Shopping District (PSD) or Business Improvement Zone (BIZ)
- Local brokers
- Neighborhood groups
- Neighboring municipalities
- Potential investors
- Public employees (police, fire, health, education)
- Real estate professionals
- Religious groups
- Senior groups
- Social organizations
- Students
- Young professionals
- Other entities familiar with the community

THE COMMUNICATION TOOLBOX

The public participation toolbox is virtually limitless, from tried and true methods to the truly imaginative. This section is where a municipality can describe the positive and negative aspects of ways the public is already being reached and brainstorm new ways to engage stakeholders. The following are sample methods for community involvement:

Basic announcement methods for public meetings

The following methods are often used to advertise public meetings. Many times, this does not result in involvement of all stakeholders, especially those with visual impairments, non-English speakers, the illiterate, youth, citizens with limited mobility and those who work during the time of the public meeting.

- Newspaper posting
- Website posting
- Flier posting on community hall door
- Announcements at council meeting
- Postcard mailings
- Attachments to water bills
- Local cable notification

Proactive practices

The following are some example public participation methods that are less reactive and more focused on education and collaborative visioning. Many of these methods would not be possible without strong partnerships with stakeholders identified earlier in the P³ and a community that is committed to public input.

- **Surveys:** Surveys are useful for identifying specific areas of interest or concentration from a broad scope of ideas or issues. These areas of interest can then be further explored using other methods like the ones outlined below. A community may use a survey to identify where to start in the planning process, or the general climate surrounding a topic. Surveys can be useful to get a general idea of something, but should not be used as the sole method of public input. It is helpful for a municipality to administer surveys with partners. For example, schools can send surveys home with children, churches can have them available to fill out and neighborhood groups can put them in mail boxes. As with most public input efforts, it is best to vary the delivery method (mailed, handed out, electronic) and include bilingual language if applicable in your community.
- **Community workshops:** These could be as simple as a series of question and answer sessions or as creative as creating a board game. The P³ should identify potential venues, considering access for the disabled and citizens without vehicles. In addition, the P³ should identify how to reach underrepresented groups. For example, holding workshops in different languages to suit your community's demographic and at different locations and times. This section is an ideal place to identify who would facilitate the workshops; whether it is an outside consultant, active citizen or municipal staff. Often workshops are a great way to educate the community surrounding a specific topic and hear concerns, questions and ideas.
- **Charrettes:** The charrette differs from a workshop because it is a multi-day event where designers and planners work on a plan in-between what are called "feedback loops." Usually between three and seven days, citizens can come to the "charrette studio", which is an office on or near the location of the proposed plan or project. Citizens offer ideas while the charrette team facilitates and observes. From these suggestions, the designers and planners change the plan to suit community input and present their creation the next day where the community offers feedback again. This makes up one cycle of a "feedback

loop”. There can be up to five feedback loops, resulting in a final plan shortly thereafter. This process can be completed with many different budgets, depending on the expertise of municipal staff and local residents. Charrettes take much planning beforehand. The P³ offers an opportunity to begin planning for how a community would hold a charrette and who would be involved. For more information, visit www.charretteinstitute.org.

- **Walkabouts:** Walkabouts offer candid feedback from a variety of stakeholders when discussing a specific area. They can be paired with community workshops or charrettes to measure the perceived safety and comfort of pedestrians in a downtown, neighborhood or corridor. Walkabouts are also useful for identifying desired design, problem properties or safety concerns. The P³ should identify how citizens will be notified of a walkabout, keeping in mind the limitations of just one notification method. In addition, the P³ should determine if community partners and staff can facilitate the sessions, or if a consultant will be necessary.
- **One-on-one interviews:** Interviews are a great way to get specifics on a topic. In the stakeholder section of the P³, specific community leaders may have been identified, making them ideal candidates for an interview. Some communities have individuals that are very vocal about issues in the community. Interviewing them may give some perspective on how to address their concerns. It is important to remember that one interview reflects the opinion of one individual and should not be considered the standing of the entire community.
- **Focus groups:** Like interviews, focus groups can help to narrow down concepts or get a specific side of the story. Stakeholders groups identified earlier in P³ make ideal participants of a focus group.
- **Standing committees:** These are focus groups that repeatedly meet and will differ depending on the needs of a community. They are perfect for concerned residents, underrepresented groups, or groups that may have specific needs in a community, such as students or seniors. This is an opportunity for a municipality to draw from the expertise of residents, perhaps organizing a standing committee of real estate professionals, business owners and brokers to offer feedback.
- **Social networking:** Technology offers a unique opportunity to give and receive information to a mass of people. Municipalities can post events, share information and even solicit feedback. This public participation method is best used in conjunction with other methods because it excludes those who do not use social media. The P³ should identify the social media venues a community will use, the target audience of these venues and who will be responsible for making posts and monitoring the posts of others. The ability to spread misinformation or post disrespectful comments makes it important to plan for the use of social media.

STRATEGIES FOR OUTREACH

The P³ allows a municipality to plan for public input, rather than simply reacting to it. In this case, the sooner the public is involved, the better. Proactively engaging stakeholders fosters a sense of ownership and prevents delays caused by unforeseen issues. This section should outline how the community will be engaged from the communication toolbox depending on the situation. The following are common times at which public input should be solicited:

Master plan update

Zoning ordinance update

Downtown development plan

Corridor improvement plan

Parks and recreation plan

Low controversy development project

High controversy development project

COMMUNICATING RESULTS

This section should outline how results from public participation sessions will be communicated back to the public. This demonstrates that the responses were heard, and creates an environment of transparency. Municipalities have many venues of communication: television, newsletters, the municipal website, social media. The appropriate venue to communicate, who is responsible for this communication and how soon after the public participation event are all described in this section. There is no one way of communicating. The community should choose venues that make sense for that community. The following are examples of ways to communicate public feedback:

Public meetings: The meetings will be televised on station. Also, person will post meeting minutes online no later than amount of time after the meeting is held.

Surveys: Surveys will be compiled by person no later than amount of time after the survey was completed. The results will be posted online and published in the quarterly newsletter.

Community workshops/charrettes: Person is charged with taking notes during community workshops and charrettes. These notes will be posted on the workshop/ charrette Facebook page no later than amount of time after the workshop or the charrette. In addition, the results of these events will be communicated in a wrap up community meeting.

Walkabouts: The facilitator(s) of will walkabouts will take notes during the walkabout. These results will be compiled by person and posted online no later than amount of time after the walkabout.

One-on-one interviews: Interview results will be kept confidential for the comfort of the participants unless requested otherwise.

Focus groups: Focus group results will be kept confidential for the comfort of the participants unless requested otherwise.

Standing committees: Meeting minutes will be taken by person and posted online no later than amount of time after the standing meeting occurs.

Social networking: Person is responsible for monitoring the municipal Facebook page. They will respond to public posts no later than amount of time after the post was made. Person will tweet on behalf of the municipality concerning community events and public participation results.

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PARTICIPATION EFFORTS

In this section, the community should identify how the P³ will be updated depending on the success of the various outreach methods. For example, this section may identify who records all public participation efforts. In addition, it may outline an exit survey for certain public participation events. Furthermore, this section will identify when the P³ will be reviewed again. This will result in public participation that is continuously evolving to better obtain public input. A sample document for reviewing public participation events and a sample exit survey can be found in the appendix.

CLOSING

Public participation, when properly executed, builds community consensus and strengthens sense of place. Creating a culture of collaborative visioning enriches democracy by allowing citizens to voice their ideas, not just their complaints. A community's public participation plan is not another document to be created and shelved, but a daily guide for how to best incorporate the public into decisions that affect their space. The community should end the P³ by stating again why the document was created and making a commitment to its use. Both elected/appointed officials and municipal staff should participate in the creation and application of the P³. The result will be development that the whole community has planned for, smoother approval processes and a more satisfied public.

APPENDIX

The community event satisfaction survey (page 15) and internal public participation evaluation (page 16) are included for your use.

COMMUNITY EVENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

What event did you attend today?

How did you hear about this event?

Was this event held at a convenient location and time?

Are you glad you came to this event? Would you improve it in any way?

date _____

INTERNAL PUBLIC PARTICIPATION EVALUATION

Type of public participation:

Date

How was the event advertised?

Where was the event held?

How many people attended? Was there a group that was under-represented?

Who facilitated/completed the event?

Are there ways this could be improved for future events?