Have you ever walked into a public meeting, seen a larger than usual audience, and immediately gotten nervous, wondering what people are upset about? It seems that public engagement has become more confrontational — but it doesn’t have to be that way.

When you’re a city leader, elected or staff, public meetings are part of life, and public input is essential to city work. It’s important to make these meetings a time of sharing information, while respecting and addressing differences. And a large turnout, including residents with varying perspectives, should be the goal.

Better public engagement builds a sense of community, increases productive dialogue, and decreases division. Difficult conversations and tough decisions will always remain part of the mix, but by thoughtfully planning public meetings, you can involve more citizens, draw out a broader range of ideas and concerns, and demonstrate leadership through difficult issues.

Get input early
Cities often hold only those meetings that are required by law or are typically held as part of their regular process. Regular council meetings are important, and they typically follow a traditional structure.

But when the council is considering a significant public project or a controversial proposal, you might want to add some informal information sessions earlier in the process. This will take some extra time and perhaps cost, but it can add significant value.

You can’t tell people too soon or too often about something that will impact them. It will allow concerns to be uncovered early, so you are better prepared to address them as the process moves forward.
Be clear about the purpose of the meeting

One of the building blocks to a good public meeting is being very clear about the intent of the meeting. While this sounds simple enough, many people in the audience may misunderstand the purpose of the meeting.

People may come thinking they are going to sway the city council against a project when the council has already debated and voted for it, and the meeting is actually about the timing of construction. The audience is upset because they feel they are not being heard. The council is upset because this project has been discussed many times over the last six months — where were all these people then?

At the start of the meeting, make sure you clearly state the purpose of the meeting, and perhaps carefully walk through the history of the issue and how you got where you are today.

Get creative with invitations

At the beginning of your planning, consider who will likely attend the meeting, and then who should attend but will need some extra outreach. Are you identifying creative ways to make sure everyone is invited? (See “Real-Life Example: Circle Pines” above.)

Remember, when a quorum of the council (and of most other standing city committees) gathers to discuss city business, it is subject to the Open Meeting Law, which outlines specific requirements, including those for providing public notice. But cities can go beyond that notice and look for additional ways to encourage people to attend.

Think about a particular group you want to reach but is rarely involved. What extra efforts could draw them to your meeting? Try reaching out to nonprofits and community groups for help. Consider mailing an attractive postcard with positive and inviting language that helps define why someone should attend.

Maybe you could serve punch and cookies and offer free child care. Also, hold it at a location convenient for people, at a day and time that works well for those you want to attend.

Preparing for the meeting

You can’t over-prepare for what could be a challenging meeting. Be ready to answer some key questions as you plan out the meeting. For example, what are the interests and concerns of those likely to attend? Do likely participants have any gaps in information? You may need to figure out an easy-to-understand way to get everyone up to speed.

Consider talking with colleagues from other communities that have dealt with a similar situation. What should you expect to face at the meeting, and what advice do they have?

If there is a key leader or an organized group concerned about the issue, consider meeting with them or their leaders before you plan the meeting. This will help you better understand their views and concerns in a more calm, discreet setting.

Allow other ways for people to give input without attending the meeting, such as via email or an online survey. Offering multiple ways for people to give you their ideas is important because not everyone is comfortable using a microphone in front of a crowd.

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At the meeting

Early in the meeting, present the purpose and the agenda. Let attendees know when there will be opportunities for public input today or in the future. Talk about the decision-making process and describe the roles of the people presenting information.

If participants need to sign in or identify themselves, explain the purpose this serves for both the speakers and the audience. Don’t ask people to identify themselves if it really isn’t needed because it could be viewed as a way to intimidate them.

Next, be sure to explain the meeting ground rules, including the values and behaviors that attendees are expected to adhere to, such as respecting all voices, not interrupting, etc. Ask everyone to be civil and to be good listeners — to listen the way they would want others to listen to them.

Acknowledge that there may be disagreements and that this is part of a democracy. You might even want to share this great quote from President Harry Truman: “When everyone in the room is thinking the same thing, no one is thinking very much.”

You might also consider breaking into small groups. This has proven to be a powerful way to give everyone a chance to state their concerns and to keep the meeting from being dominated by a few vocal people. (See “Real-Life Example: Department of Natural Resources” above.)

In the groups, have each person introduce him- or herself and share their ideas or concerns about the topic. Ask everyone to listen carefully to all members of the group, and to stay within the time constraints so that everyone gets to share their thoughts. Next, ask people to reflect on what they have heard from the group and ask what ideas they have on a way to move forward.

If time allows, consider having one member of each group report their key discussion points to the full group, perhaps allowing the staff and leadership to clarify any misconceptions.

At the end of the meeting, make sure to talk about the next steps in the process and thank everyone for attending.

Also, always make sure to start on time and end on time. It’s fine if people want to stay afterwards and ask questions, but ending the meeting on time is a way to once again model respectful behavior.

After the meeting

There are a few action items that should happen soon after the meeting, including:

- Posting on the city website information from the meeting — such as handouts, a meeting summary, or a video of the meeting if it was recorded — so that others can see what happened. This adds to the transparency of the process.
- Following up on any commitments made during the meeting. For example, maybe you promised to send out additional information or to schedule another meeting.
- Having key staff and leaders debrief to identify what worked best during the meeting and what could have gone better. You can apply these lessons to make future meetings better.

By taking all these steps before, during, and after a public meeting, you’ll improve the way your city engages the community.

Effective public engagement is critical to make sure your residents are well-informed, and all voices are heard.

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REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE:
Department of Natural Resources

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) put together plans to improve Little Rock Lake’s water quality by temporarily drawing down the water level of the lake near the City of Rice. There were concerns from people living in the area, and a public meeting was held at the old Town Hall in Rice.

After hearing some information from the DNR and other experts, the large crowd was divided into small groups to share their ideas and concerns. This process generated many good questions, which were then posed to the available experts for a quick response.

Rather than a loud and boisterous meeting, the small-group approach resulted in a fast moving and productive meeting that allowed everyone to participate and have their voices heard.

The DNR created a section on their website for information and meeting notes so that those unable to attend could see what had been discussed. This also allowed meeting attendees to see that their concerns were listed as part of the meeting notes.

ON THE WEB

Several public engagement resources, including “Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and Other Challenges to Public Engagement Processes” by the Institute for Local Government, are available at www.mn.gov/admin/ocdr.

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