

Planning Commissions are tasked with crafting public policies that determine how people use and develop their land. In facing all of the complexities of meeting state and federal law and addressing social, environmental and economic concerns, we often don't take the time to involve the people who will be affected by the decisions.

Engaging your fellow townspeople not only helps generate ideas and solutions customized for the community, it reduces the possibility that a planning initiative will be opposed by voters. Citizen participation takes time, energy and focus, but without it, planning has little value.

### Communicate \* Communicate \* Communicate

Community involvement starts with informed citizens. Make it a priority to communicate your planning activities. Choose a format like a short monthly update using one or more media – websites, Front Porch Forum, local newspapers, etc. and let people know what the planning commission is working on, what issues are under discussion, anticipated next steps and invite participation.

- **Keep language simple.** Always use language and explanations that everyone, not just those in the know, can understand. Most people find planning and zoning jargon to be unintelligible so explain issues as simply as possible, in plain English, focusing on why it matters.
- **Get the word out in multiple ways.** People need to know about public policies that might affect them but busy lives leave little “band width” to learn about and absorb the implications of land use policies. For this reason, it is important to communicate often, and in multiple ways, so that the message reaches as many people as possible.

### Routine Meetings

- At a minimum, make sure meeting agendas and approved meeting minutes are posted online in a place where the public can easily find them.
- Welcome citizens who attend meetings and give a little orientation so they know how to participate. For example, bring a copy of the [Essentials of Land Use Planning and Regulations](#) to meetings and show visitors the sections pertinent to your meeting.

### LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

#### INFORM

Commit to keeping citizens informed about planning. Help the public understand problems and solutions.

- Fact Sheets
- Newsletters
- Websites

#### CONSULT

Provide opportunities for input on existing ideas - listen, acknowledge concerns and answer questions.

- Surveys
- Public Meetings

#### INVOLVE

Provide opportunities for dialogue and interaction. Obtain advice from the public and generate new ideas.

- Workshops
- Focus Groups

#### COLLABORATE

Partner with the public in decision-making, including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution.

- Citizen Advisory Committees
- Participatory Decision Making (Charrettes)

## Special Projects

When embarking on a municipal plan, a bylaw update or other planning activity, especially if it involves potentially controversial issues, citizen participation needs to be front and center.

- Plan to plan – start your project with a [citizen participation strategy](#) and integrate it into your project.
- Take time to talk informally, one-on-one, with individuals who are likely to have the most concerns. The simple acts of listening and showing respect can help alleviate the anxiety people experience when they think a planning action might threaten their property, livelihood or way of life.
- Learn about skills and methods for engaging the public productively in decision-making.
  - [UVM Extension](#) offers fact sheets, and other resources on citizen participation and meeting processes.
  - The [Community Planning website](#) from the UK offers a soup-to-nuts compendium of tools for public outreach.

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