

Official Public Meetings That are More Participatory and Effective

Developing Shared Civic Infrastructure

BUILDING BLOCK 9 OF 12 - IMPROVING PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING



The official proceedings of city councils, school boards, zoning committees and other decision-making bodies usually have highly regimented agendas and formats. Citizens sometimes have an opportunity to voice their opinions, but these are usually during “open mic” sessions, which tend to maximize conflict and frustration for both citizens and city leaders. Officials and citizens alike tend to value exchanges that are less tense, more interactive and more productive.

Thinking and Meeting Out of the Box

Austin, Texas (pop. 790,000)

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Austin has recognized the limitations of traditional public meetings, and has moved beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to public involvement. The city maintains a robust presence on Facebook and Twitter, using Facebook posts and Twitter hash tags to entice followers to contribute input on decision-making. All community meetings are televised live, and questions and comments can be contributed via voicemail, text message and instant message. To communicate to participants on how their input affected the decision, the city collects e-mail addresses and phone numbers at every meeting and sends out notes, next meeting information and information on final decisions, with an indication of how public input influenced that decision. For its Imagine Austin planning process, the city supported productive public discussions on development issues by creating a Meeting-in-a-Box. Over the last two years, hundreds of residents have used this tool to hold their own community conversations. The Meeting-in-a-Box helps individuals organize small meetings of five-to-eight participants to learn about and respond to the vision plan for the city. Materials include a host guide, vision statement, development information, discussion components and themes, individual feedback sheets, a community design poster and a self-addressed return envelope. Results of the community conversations have been compiled and are on display in various locations around the city.

PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS:

- Build a stronger sense of community.
- Reduce tension around controversial issues.
- Develop smarter, more widely supported policies.
- Give marginalized voices a place at the table.

POTENTIAL ACTIONS:

- Use more participatory formats for city council, school board, zoning committee and other city meetings (for example, replace “open mic” segments with small-group breakouts, Open Space, Twitterfalls or other interactive exercises).
- Hold official meetings in places other than the traditional downtown locations.
- Supplement official meetings with separate deliberative processes, either online or face-to-face.

WORK BEST WHEN:

- They use online tools to allow citizens to post questions, comments and ideas before and between meetings.
- There are well-established lines of communication between official bodies and the citizen spaces in neighborhoods, schools and online settings.
- Officials report back clearly and regularly — in both online and face-to-face settings — on what they have heard from residents and how that input was incorporated into policy.