

# Communication & Coordination

“What we have here is a failure to communicate.”

*Cool Hand Luke*

## Public Participation

These famous last words in the movie

*Cool Hand Luke* too frequently resemble our public participation process. Public participation is often a win-lose scenario defined by legalistic procedures and characterized by acrimony and frustration.

Since public participation is highly prized in Asheville, it is important that the process set up to receive public input is effective in achieving the desired results. In most cases, public participation should be seen as a process of negotiation as opposed to an opportunity to state inflexible positions and principles and hope that there are enough decision-makers of a like philosophy to win the argument. In other words, public participation processes should be set up to allow people to define where their interests lie and provide facilitation intended to demonstrate how those interests can be achieved.

Public participation is also an important tenant of Smart Growth, as the following quote from the draft Smart Growth Core Principles under

development by the American Planning Association illustrates:

*Increased citizen participation in all aspects of the planning process and at every level of government to ensure that planning outcomes are based in collective decision making. We have been undergoing a profound demographic transformation. Responding to our ethnically diverse society is essential to our well being as a whole and to developing the social capital necessary for shaping thriving, vibrant neighborhoods and communities. We need to design comprehensive strategies to engage meaningful participation in planning processes, to find common ground for shared decision-making by all citizens, and to ensure community equity in the distribution of resources.*

## Public Hearings

One of the most common forms of public participation used by local governments is the public hearing. Public hearings offer an opportunity for decision-makers to hear how the public feels about a particular project or program. They are often held pursuant to statutory requirements when land use issues such as



zoning and conditional use permits are involved.

A typical public hearing includes the following components:

- A presentation or announcement of the project or program by City staff.
- Additional information about the project or program is provided by the applicant (if the applicant is someone other than City staff).
- Public comments are taken; those comments usually express either support for or opposition to the project or program, but may include requests for information.
- Discussion by the decision-makers.
- A decision by the decision-makers.

Public hearings do not always result in effective identification of people's interests or allow for coherent negotiation. They are usually run under specific rules that limit the amount and type of information that can be expressed in an effort to focus discussion on predetermined areas of review. Decisions are usually regarded as a "win" by some participants and as a "loss" by other participants.

## Design Charrettes

Design charrettes are public participation opportunities intended to obtain public input in a highly facilitated fashion. Usually a design charrette involves a particular development project, such as the one held in the summer of 2000 for the re-design of Pack Square. They can be broadened to include the design of an entire neighborhood as well, such as the design charrette held for the West End Clingman Area Neighborhood in early 2001.

A design charrette first involves the collection of basic information about the project or neighborhood by a trained design professional or a group of design professionals. In the public participation process, this base information is used to help find feasible ideas about the project design so that an element of practicality is introduced into the process at an early stage. A design charrette has as its goal a final product – the ultimate design of a project or neighborhood. This product orientation re-

"It is evident that our whole political machinery presupposes a people so fundamentally at one that they can safely afford to bicker; and so sure of their own moderation that they are not dangerously disturbed by the never-ending din of political conflict. May it always be so."

*Arthur Balfour, 1st Earl of Balfour, in an introduction to Walter Bagehot The English Constitution; November 1927, from Power Quotes by Daniel B. Baker (1992)*

“Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and test of our civilization.”

*Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi*

express a position as opposed to actually defining their specific interests. For example, if the end

result of the process is defined as a park design, a participant will not be effective if he or she expresses the position that a park is not needed.

### Focus Groups

Like design charrettes, focus groups offer an opportunity to gain public input about a project or program in a facilitated fashion. Focus groups are relatively small groups of participants whose discussion is facilitated by a person or persons who are trained to insure that participants have a fair and equal opportunity to provide input about the program or project. Focus groups are often used early in program or project development to identify key issues and interests so that the program or project can be designed to accommodate those interests. Focus groups often precede design charrettes as a means of gathering the base information for the charrette discussion.



### Public Forums

Public forums can be likened to large-scale focus groups. They are often initiated with some presentation on a particular project or program. Participants then provide input about the program or project. Discussion is guided by a facilitator or moderator. The intent of a public forum is usually to provide an initial opportunity to seek input and identify potential conflict points.

### Community or Neighborhood Meetings

Community or neighborhood meetings are opportunities for people to provide input on a wide range of issues. As used in Asheville, the agenda for community or neighborhood meetings is to simply open up discussion for whatever people would like to discuss. Often there is an opportunity for people with expertise on issues that are likely to be raised to provide information or responses to questions during the community or neighborhood meeting. These meetings often result in follow-up information being provided later in order to address or respond to issues or concerns raised at the meeting.

## Neighborhood Meetings

City staff encourages voluntary pre-application meetings between developers and the affected surrounding neighborhoods or adjoining property owners. Additionally in late 2003, the Asheville City Council established a voluntary process in which a professionally facilitated neighborhood/developer meeting can substitute for a public hearing before the Planning and Zoning Commission. The purpose behind these meetings is to acquaint the surrounding property owners with the development project. These meetings can be very effective in answering questions and resolving concerns prior to the start of the formal development review process.

## Mediation

Mediation is a formal dispute resolution process intended to address a specific issue or issues. Mediation sessions are generally facilitated by professional mediator. Participation is usually limited to a specific number and/or category of participants and those involved in the process usually agree to abide by the results of the process.

In some communities, mediation is either a required or an optional procedure for resolving land use disputes. It is not frequently used in Asheville, but could be explored as a possible dispute resolution process for land use issues.

## Community Oriented Government

The City of Asheville has a formal Community Oriented Government program. This program is neighborhood-based and typically involves arranging a tour of a particular neighborhood by an extensive task force of City staff members; neighborhood leaders usually determine the tour route and conduct the tour. Specific neighborhood problems are noted and, after the tour, remedial projects and efforts are taken to resolve these problems. A formal follow-up is provided to neighborhood leaders to demonstrate what steps have been taken to address these problems.

It is extremely important to use the appropriate public participation method if the goal is effective communication. If the format for receiving public input is not carefully chosen, a failure to communicate is frequently the end result. In the Implementation Element to the

"There is no process that will make a difficult decision easy."

*Bob Oast, City Attorney*

*"People are always 'down on' what they aren't 'up on.'"*

*Ernie Daniels as Quoted by Jim Ellis,  
Asheville City Council Member*

## Intergovernmental Coordination

An effective Smart Growth development pattern should not end at the city limits. Some of the great benefits of a more compact urban pattern is its ability to preserve farmland and open space, preserve infrastructure capacity, and create a transportation system that is both efficient and cost-effective. If this pattern stops at the City limits, the promise of Smart Growth will not be fully realized in our area.

Consequently, it is important for the City of Asheville to begin discussions with Land of Sky Regional Council, Buncombe County, Woodfin, Biltmore Forest, the Water Authority, The Airport Authority, and the Metropolitan Sewerage District - and any other interested jurisdictions - about the future of land development in our area. These discussions should first identify broad community goals, then look to the tools, incentives and programs by which these goals can be implemented.



## Public Notification

While not specifically a form of public participation, public notification is necessary if there is to be effective public participation. For public hearings, the City follows state law with regard to the required public notification process. A variety of other means of public notification are used for public participation processes that do not have specific statutory requirements. These include: signs; mailed notices; "door hangers", broadcast faxes, telephone messages, advertisements, newspaper and other media announcements and press releases.

Public notification must be tailored to the specific project or process. The 10 day notice required for public hearings may not be at all suitable for notice to business owners when a major widening project is planned for the street in front of their property. Development of a formal public notification plan would facilitate public participation and public awareness.

## Use of Technology and the Media

“The media” is an all-inclusive term that basically addresses the method by which information is disseminated to the public. The City of Asheville uses a variety of media to get information out to its citizens, including press releases, government access television (Channel 20), the City webpage, weekly newspaper columns, and similar methods.

Technological advances such as the internet, automated telephone messaging, and government access television offer enormous opportunities to improve the effectiveness of public participation. It is highly important to inventory the various types of media available for involving the public and utilize the most effective medium (or media) to accomplish the particular participation goal.

Pursuant to this, each goal and strategy contained in this document is listed in an Implementation Matrix (p. \_\_\_\_ ) that includes the method and medium/media of public participation that will be used in implementing the goal and strategy. Additionally, this section includes a variety of goals and strategies for

the development of a comprehensive public participation program.

“The government is us; we are the government, you and I.”

*Theodore Roosevelt in a speech in Asheville, NC, September, 1902, from Power Quotes by Daniel B. Baker (1992)*

## Public Participation and Intergovernmental Coordination Goals and Strategies

**Goal I: To insure that the appropriate public participation process is selected so as to result in the most effective communication and to insure the receipt of public input.**

### Strategies:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of the following public hearing processes and make adjustments as needed to improve public participation:
  - Zoning and Conditional Use Permit Hearings
  - Technical Review Committee Hearings
  - Board of Adjustment Appeals
2. Examine the development review process

"The process is always suspected by people who aren't satisfied with the outcome."

*Scott Shuford, Asheville Planning Director*

for opportunities to more effectively engage the public earlier in the initial project concept development.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of pre-application meetings between developers and affected neighborhoods as provided in current City ordinances.
  - Consider whether mandatory pre-application meetings should be required and, if so, whether they should be facilitated by City staff or by professional mediators/facilitators.
  - Develop better methods of public notification.
3. Continue to effectively implement and promote the Community Oriented Government program.

**Goal II. Continue to promote and facilitate effective and efficient intergovernmental coordination.**

**Goal III. Use technology more effectively in alerting the public to issues of importance.**

**Strategies**

1. Explore better use of the City web page and government access (Channel 20) in communicating information about development activities and other related items of public interest.
2. Examine the use of other media in getting information to the public.

