

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

Additional Resources

"Engaging Affected Communities - Barriers and Obstacles" US EPA Community Involvement Conference, Keynote address July 23, 2003. Larry Charles, One/CHANE, Inc., Hartford, CT <http://epanpic.org/2003/proceedings.cfm>
[Providing links to a non-EPA Web site does not constitute an endorsement by EPA or any of its employees of the sponsors of the site or the information or products presented on the site.]

Institutional Barriers to Integrating Public Involvement. Transportation Research Board, Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation, 2003. <http://trb-pi.hshassoc.com/researchtopics/instbarr.pdf>

Other EPA Public Involvement Brochures

Introducing EPA's Public Involvement Policy
How to Plan and Budget for Public Involvement
How to Identify People to Involve
How to Provide Technical and Financial Assistance for Public Involvement
How to Do Outreach for Public Involvement
How to Consult with and Involve the Public
How to Review and Use Public Input and Provide Feedback
How to Evaluate Public Involvement
How to Improve Public Meetings and Hearings
How to Improve Working with Tribes
How to Involve Environmental Justice Communities

"Involvement brings the pieces together" artwork is the creation of Erica Ann Turner, who contributed the work through an agreement between the Art Institute of Washington and EPA.

More Information about the Policy

Copies of the Policy and the Framework for implementing it are available at <http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/policy2003.pdf> and <http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/policy2003/framework.pdf>

The Website for the Internet Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions is <http://www.network-democracy.org/epa/epa-pip>

EPA's Response to Comments on the Draft 2000 Public Involvement Policy is available at <http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/policy2003/response.pdf>



Involvement brings
the pieces together

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Goal

To identify best practices that avoid, neutralize or overcome common barriers to effective public involvement.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued its Public Involvement Policy in June 2003. The Policy provides guidance to EPA managers and staff on how to involve the public in the Agency's decision making. Its overall goal is for excellent public involvement to become an integral part of EPA's culture, thus supporting more effective Agency actions.

This brochure (one in a series), suggests ways to avoid, neutralize or help overcome common barriers to effective public involvement activities and processes.

Assess before you act

Are you sure of your project and public involvement goals, your internal support and capabilities? Do you know the needs of the potential participants?

Are you really ready to go, or do you need to:

- Ask others who have succeeded in similar situations what worked?
- Help key EPA staff and managers see how effective public involvement can help the Agency reach a better decision?
- Mentor staff or seek process design advice yourself?
- Provide more information to potential participants before they can meaningfully participate (based on community/issue/conflict assessment)?
- Simplify dense technical language into plain English?
- Translate information into other languages?
- Find technical or financial assistance for the participants or make some other accommodations to include different people?
- Develop local partnerships to reach those whose customs, cultures, education or economic circumstances limit their involvement?
- Develop collaborative relationships (being mindful of the limitations imposed by the Federal Advisory Committee Act) with local officials, organizations, media, faith-based groups, businesses and more so you can identify and interest their members?
- Build mutual trust?

Provide transparency and access

If the project is complex or controversial, then any decision may be difficult for a lay person to understand. In such instances it's especially important to have a transparent decision process and provide easy access to clear information.

Staff and managers should each be able to clearly state the goals, roles and steps in the decision process. Find and work to use as many information access forums and places suitable to those you seek to involve – from door-to-door conversations to web sites.

Transparent process and easy access allow staff to more effectively reach out to the potentially affected public. This is the basis for building awareness and understanding of the issues and process. It enables the public to generate useful information and options that can influence environmental outcomes. Access and transparency can also build public trust and belief in the fairness of decisions.

Avoid being an add-on

Be an advocate for public involvement to ensure it's included from the beginning in project planning. Be ready to demonstrate that results are more sustainable when public involvement is an integral part of planning for decisions.

Collect and tell stories of how listening to stakeholders provides the Agency with a wider variety of ideas, new information and alternative choices that improved environmental outcomes.

Leverage staff and money

Based on your assessment of what EPA and the public need estimate the budget and staff you should have to hold the number and types of events you have identified, to provide information to the public and develop access to pertinent project information. If you are not familiar with the best ways to support and conduct public involvement activities, talk to your colleagues. EPA has a network of experienced public involvement specialists whose job is to work with external groups and individuals. Look to them for advice. They can provide creative and practical ideas that will fit.

If your budget is tight, consult with coworkers about ways to stretch your budget. For example, in addition to holding your own meetings, try making presentations to community groups at their regularly scheduled meetings. Find help and leverage through other organizations' outlets such as web sites, newsletters and flyers.

This type of partnering can help you reach your intended audience more effectively. Working with partners also can help you build trust. (See the brochure for Step #1, "How to Plan and Budget for Public Involvement.")

Find people to involve

If your project is site-specific and involves a single neighborhood or town, there are easy ways to do outreach and invite participation. If your project is multi-state, region-wide or national, consider working with national or regional organizations to reach their members.

Municipal governments, civic groups, business, youth, environmental and religious organizations can help you make contact with the public. Consider partnering with non-traditional organizations such as trade and neighborhood block groups to reach people. Local media can also help.

EPA's Office of Public Affairs and regional counterparts have news media and public liaison specialists who are experienced in reaching media outlets and national groups. Staff from the Office of Congressional & Intergovernmental Relations and corresponding regional organizations can help you reach national, state and local officials as well as their associations. (See the brochure for Step #2, "How to Identify People to Involve.")

Build capacity for involvement

Doing effective public involvement work takes real skills. If you need to, and there's a little time to prepare yourself, find, ask for and take suitable training.

A community, organization or individual may need your help to build their capacity for effective involvement. They may need suitable resources to navigate complex technical and legal issues. Consider providing technical or financial assistance, holding workshops, using conference calls, hot lines or drop-in centers.

By making involvement easier, clearer and more meaningful for participants, EPA can benefit from unique, firsthand knowledge and improve the quality of Agency decisions. Check with EPA colleagues to find out how they help the potentially interested and affected public participate. Ask them about resources that may be available and creative ways that EPA, its partners or technology can provide:

- access to information
- understanding of decision making processes
- additional time for reviewing data
- public knowledge of science and its methods
- providing feedback on public input on issues

A good public involvement process can improve:

- respect for accommodation of cultural differences
- trust of public officials

(See the brochure for Step #3, "How to Provide Technical and Financial Assistance for Public Involvement" or contact EPA's public involvement staff.)

Get the right information to the right people at the right time

Base the amount of information you provide on the complexity of your project and on the expressed needs of the community. These vary for each situation, so do your homework! Making accurate material available to the public in a timely manner increases the prospects for effective public involvement.

- Make information accessible as early as possible. This enables people to make informed and productive contributions. Most people need at least 30 days notice about public involvement activities; more time if the issue is complex or there is a lot of material to review. They may appreciate a reminder two weeks after the first notice.

- Explain the basis for EPA's actions, when and how the public's ideas can be considered and how the decision process works. This makes it easier for them to participate and builds credibility.

- Depending on your audience, you may want to use public settings (churches, civic groups, libraries, malls, banks, government buildings, schools) as places where you post your notices. Place print materials in a central location, or in several locations to increase access for those without computers.

- If an urgent situation arises affecting a local area, consider going door-to-door to talk to residents and distribute printed information. If you do this, your staff or contractors should be ready to provide answers to residents questions.

- Telephone hotlines can be useful support for some decision processes. Staffed or pre-recorded hotlines can help people who want brief updates. This method is especially helpful for people who do not have Internet access and who may have problems getting out to meetings. If you use phone hotlines, you should provide a TTY choice for hearing-impaired callers. (See the brochure for steps, "How to Provide Information and Conduct Outreach for Public Involvement.")

"... because of lack of access to computers, many grassroots groups who might be stakeholders in EPA rules, processes and procedures are not participating."

*Julia Burgess
Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decision Making*

Use the public's ideas in making decisions

Giving people feedback shows that EPA takes their ideas seriously. By telling people what EPA did with their comments you can build a resilient relationship between the Agency and stakeholders, encouraging their participation in decision-making processes and building trust.

If you do not clearly explain why you did or did not use their input, people may become frustrated and may not participate the next time they have an opportunity. If this happens, the Agency loses out on potentially helpful information and ideas. (See the brochure for Step #6, "How to Review and Use Public Input and Provide Feedback.")

Evaluate public involvement activities

If you don't know how well your process worked, how will you make it better? If you don't specifically ask about the public involvement aspects of your project, you may waste time and money.

If you choose not to evaluate, you may repeat the same mistakes. Future efforts can benefit from specific information on how well and why certain public involvement activities worked or did not.

You may identify additional input that helps you make effective decisions when you make evaluation of your public involvement activities part of your early project plan. You should conduct formal and informal evaluations throughout your process to obtain such input.

Evaluation helps you to define, measure and continually improve the public involvement process. When you listen to what stakeholders say about one set of events, you can improve your chances for productive dialogue during the next set. (See the brochure for Step #7, "How to Evaluate Public Involvement.")

"No self-respecting person can do public participation unless they are willing to lose control."

*Bliss Browne
2004 International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Conference*

Sharing public involvement process decisions

To consult, collaborate and provide meaningful public involvement, it helps to be flexible and ready to share the decisions about public involvement processes when possible.

EPA conducts public involvement processes directly when it makes many of its environmental decisions. Often, however, EPA can collaborate with others in their environmental decision processes.

In all cases, sharing the work of effective public involvement means:

- Making no assumptions about the potentially affected publics or communities
- Treating people respectfully as partners
- Listening to their suggestions for improving anything related to the decision-making process
- Using their ideas when possible
- Making sure people know how you applied their contributions

Your research and assessment can be the basis for defining the public involvement process that's best for your specific project. Whether it's local and modest in scope or national and complex, your process is likely to lead to a better outcome when participants have a say in:

- Setting specific public involvement goals
- Identifying members of the public who should be involved
- Designing processes that best fit stakeholder and EPA needs
- Suggesting who needs access to pertinent project information
- Determining which process information is available where it's housed or how it is developed, distributed and presented
- Planning where, how and when specific public involvement activities happen and if they use neutral facilitators
- Developing alternative choices, and more

Consulting early with representatives of various stakeholder groups makes it easier to gain pre-activity support. These leaders can help you prepare suitable materials for each phase of the project. They know how best to publicize the overall process and specific activities for their respective communities.

If you don't feel ready to lead such processes, you might take training, ask more experienced staff for help or do some reading and research to resolve your concerns and become more comfortable working with communities, stakeholders and the public.

Your own skills and dedication to making collaborative processes work can only go so far if other people have erected barriers. Use any opportunity you find to help others become more comfortable about collaboration processes. Share good examples of when collaboration produced better environmental decisions.

Beyond collaborating with groups that include non-federal stakeholders, determine whether the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) applies. If FACA may apply to your group, consult with the Office of Cooperative Environmental Management for assistance on setting up your group. (See the brochure for Step #5, "How to Consult with and Involve the Public.")

"Foremost in my mind are the issues of access and power ... and this is not just about computers. Other barriers to access abound: language, location, education, culture, economics, etc. Without access there can be no participation. Period."

*Enrique Valtierra
Online Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decision Making*

Consult with those who traditionally don't participate

It's important for EPA to reach and hear from those who are likely to be affected yet may be unaware of the decision processes or whose participation may be limited. Make special efforts to reach out to low-income, environmental justice and non-English-speaking communities.

If standard practices don't engage certain groups or individuals, consider listening sessions, availabilities (staff is on hand to respond to project questions and posted materials), information workshops, presentations at community group meetings, visiting religious and civic leaders, doing open-line radio or cable TV interviews or taking part in fairs and festivals as alternatives.

You can promote the participation of people who may not be familiar with EPA programs by:

- Asking the community leaders (elected officials, business, church and civic leaders) what you can do to reach more local citizens
- Translating materials into languages used by the populations you want to participate
- Asking for feedback about each event from a wide variety of people and showing them how you made adjustments

Work with your community partners and local media to ensure your activities, meet and listen to your stakeholders and enforce fairness at each step. The newest participants may be the most enthusiastic or demanding. To keep them engaged, build relationships and build trust in EPA's decisions, welcome their ideas and suggestions. (See the brochure "How to Involve EJ Communities.")

