

INVOLVING CITIZENS IN THE BUSINESS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR IMPLEMENTING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROGRAMS AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FOR THE CITIZENS PARTICIPATION HANDBOOK

1. INTRODUCTION

This booklet is a handbook that describes how to involve the public in helping make municipal government policies and decisions. It is written in a way so as to make it useful to local government advisors, elected officials, city administrators, and members of civic organizations interested in making the business of government more open and accessible to the people government is supposed to serve. It is aimed at people who are in positions to institutionalize public participation procedures; people who can write regulations and pass laws and ordinances that can make what is described here become a required part of the ways things are done in government.

Your interest in this topic probably indicates that you have been, are, or soon will be somehow associated with a government that has been structurally arranged and conducts its business in a democratic way. Whatever vagaries your political situation exhibits, your circumstance is a variation of a common theme: the people who are making political decisions and public policy were either bestowed their authority through the rite of an election or owe their positions and the responsibilities that accompany it to winners of the jurisdiction's most recent election. This is the same seed from which all public participation initiatives grow. Sometimes it's fertilized by civic mindedness; sometimes, by political expediency; usually, by a combination of both. This pamphlet employs both motivations to make a case for inviting citizen participation in local government.

Finally, when promoting increased public participation in government, be cognizant that democracy exists in many varieties -- not just the American Jeffersonian brand. Every nation that considers itself "democratic" has a few ideals that profoundly affect its political life. In America, ideals (like liberty, self-government, equality, individualism, diversity) are the basis for its national identity. They are tightly wrapped in Americans' notion of what democracy ought to be. For people in most other countries, their national identity grows from the common ancestry that gradually drew them under one flag. (Before there was a Russia, there were Russian people.) Democracy encountered in its applied form around the world is often highly influenced by cultural proclivities not indigenous in America.

The word "football" conjures images of a sport played much differently in America than almost everywhere else in world. But both games, when played best, put premium value on the same athletic characteristics: speed, quickness, and agility. So it is with "democracy" and public participation. When democracy is played best, public participation throughout government's operation is easily in evidence.

2. WHY SHOULD PUBLIC PARTICIPATION BE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF MAKING POLICY IN A DEMOCRATICALLY ORGANIZED GOVERNMENT?

The Civic Perspective

Democracy is a form of government in which a substantial portion of the citizenry has opportunities to participate in ruling themselves. The best examples of democratic government offer their citizens the broadest range of opportunity to participate and have the greatest portion of their population taking advantage of those opportunities. In a democratic society, people have a civic responsibility to actively participate in governing themselves -- so said the ancient Athenians, who conceived the idea.

Democracy is usually exercised in an indirect manner. As prescribed in a constitution or charter previously approved by referendum, citizens choose a few from among them to represent all of them in their government. The event that accomplishes this is an election. Voting -- the process that determines who represents the people -- is the most obvious example of citizen participation in government. Some advocates of representative democracy go so far as to maintain that the occasional act of voting is the defining moment when civic responsibility is exercised in democratic governance.

But democracy means more than the selection of accountable representatives to undertake all the real tasks of government. In its developed form, democracy involves burdensome practices of collective self-government. Learning how to become competent citizens capable of community self-government requires individuals to deliberate as members of a community -- to learn a language of civic discourse that does more than express their private interests. From a civic perspective in a democratic society, it's as much part of the job for public officials to provide these opportunities for civic discourse as it is for their citizens to use them. In a democracy, the rulers and the ruled have a shared responsibility for making government. Responsibility is taught by giving people responsibility. Providing ways for ordinary people to become involved what government does encourages citizens to share aspects of the decision making and policy making responsibility. Responsibility of this kind cannot be ceded to great leaders. Regardless of the cultural differences among the many places democratic governments are trying to establish institutional footholds, when political leaders are only held accountable for the decisions they make at election time, democracy suffers.

In order for democracy to work, it is imperative that citizens have chances to participate in aspects of government's usual operation. Citizens are the source from which all political power and political authority is supposed to flow. The importance of their role should be regularly re-affirmed for them. It's every elected leader's responsibility to make sure that those opportunities are provided, and it's every citizen's responsibility to learn how to participate constructively in government between elections.

The Political Perspective

No matter what cultural accessories democracy sprouts in its many applied forms around the world, the variations grow from one standard assumption: leaders became leaders because they got the greatest amount of citizen support in the last election. Even if they were appointed to their positions or chosen from among a body of directly elected representatives, the basis for being able to hold their jobs is the continued support of more potential voters than anyone else who wants their job. It's clear who the boss is in this system -- it's the voting public.

The public's opinion (about who should lead them, in what general direction and at what general pace they want to be led) has an important place in all democratic societies because of the concept that government springs from the will of the people it governs. The idea that government should attend to the opinions of ordinary citizens is deeply embedded in democratic thought and has to be an important consideration for anyone who wants to have his or her job for more than one interim between successive elections. Practically speaking, public opinion is an important influence on government but doesn't necessarily directly determine what public officials always do. Public opinion works mostly to impose limits and directions on the choices available to leaders in democracies -- a fact that doesn't diminish its importance as part of the democratic framework, but rather describes how important it is that a public official be aware of it.

Elections are certainly good indicators of public opinion; so are public opinion polls. The first provides the information the hard way (one's job is at immediate risk in order to get it), and it often comes too late to enhance a public official's political career. The second way is expensive and the information received is often subject to broad interpretation and is never absolutely accurate. But there's also a third way to gauge public opinion:

Public officials can invite citizens to get a glimpse of what goes on inside their government, learn about how decisions are made and what is considered when those decisions are made. Officials can create forums where interested citizens (likely voters) can offer their opinions about public policies that affect where they live, how they work, and how the taxes they pay are spent.

A good politician will come away from such an experience with an enhanced appreciation for the voters' overall mood. The situation will show their attitudes about projects and problems the politician has to make decisions about (all of which becomes part of his performance evaluation -- a major factor in his re-election campaign).

There are at least four reasons why encouraging public participation in government is good politics:

1. Elected officials get chances to meet voters face-to-face and broaden their base of support (and the people who will take the politician up on the opportunity to participate in the governing process are indeed people who vote). The politician instantly becomes more than a name in the newspaper or among the many names on a ballot on election day.
2. People like to be asked their opinion about important issues -- especially issues that directly affect them. Even if they choose not to offer an opinion, they like to be asked. It makes them feel important, and people like to think they matter.
3. The circumstance provides the public official with an opportunity to show his boss (voters) that he knows his job and is doing it responsibly -- something invaluable at election time. Potential challengers have no such opportunities.
4. The politician has created a forum where he can control the agenda, the flow of information, and get the feedback he needs to make the best political decision he can when the time comes that decisions have to be made.

Creating an opportunity for ordinary citizens to become involved in government at times besides elections is an example of a situation that politicians face too rarely in politics -- when doing the right thing is the right thing to do. It's good democratic government, and it's good democratic politics.

3. AVENUES FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT

Citizen participation is most effectively accomplished at the local government level. Not coincidentally, a nation's democratic tendencies grow from democratic traditions first established in its towns, cities and villages. Ordinary citizens identify closest with local government. Its leaders are their neighbors and the mayor's office and the city council's chambers are conveniently nearby; the business it conducts often directly affects their daily lives; it's where their involvement is most likely to influence an outcome. Local government officials are in frequent contact with the people they serve because a large part of the local politician's job is constituent service-based. Citizens are motivated to participate; local officials have a proclivity for conducting many aspects of their work face-to-face with citizens.

There are three things that a local government jurisdiction routinely does that captures its residents' interest and attention:

1. levies taxes and spends the money the municipality has directly collected from its citizens and has received as shared revenue from taxes its citizens have paid to the state government,
2. plans and regulates community development,
3. provides essential services (like water and sewer services, public transportation, police and fire protection, housing for low-income people, heating and electrical utilities, garbage pick-up).

There are usually two important policy documents local governments develop and regularly refer to as they do these things: a budget and a land use or development plan. A useful and comprehensive public

participation program can be organized around activities that involve citizens in a budget proposal's review and/or a comprehensive plan's development and implementation.

Doing a budget is an annual affair -- the responsibility of the government's administrative branch. The budget document includes revenue projections and an accounting of how those revenues will be spent (commonly organized by listing each administrative agency or department, each office's allocation being broken into categories like personnel and funds set aside for special projects). The city council is usually responsible for passing the laws that authorize collecting the required revenues that have to be raised locally and approving the budget in its final form. The budget is very much a public policy instrument. It establishes what the municipality will be doing in the coming year by determining what gets funded and what doesn't, and how much of the city's scarce resources (money, time and manpower) will be set aside for funded projects and activities.

A good place to involve citizens in the public budgetary process is when the city administration first presents its proposed budget to the city council. Council members, being the people's representatives in the government, will probably find it helpful to hear from the people what they think about how much the mayor thinks they ought to be taxed and what he suggests their money be spent for. Council members can take the public's reaction into account as they review, revise and approve the next year's budget.

Probably the best way to handle the public's review of the budget proposal is to convene at least two public hearings: one, held on the occasion of the administration's presentation of its proposal to the council; a second, just prior to the council's consideration of its adoption (often in an amended form, reflecting adjustments made because of the public's reaction to some of its parts). How to organize a public hearing and a description of what usually happens at one is described in detail in the handbook's next section.

The other place public participation works well involves city development plans. Most cities have them. If they don't, there is probably someone in the city administration who wants to do one. A good community development effort is based on sound long-range planning. That way, street and utility improvements, housing and business development, population growth and environmental projects can be managed so that they complement and benefit each other. Creating and maintaining a favorable physical and cultural environment where a community can grow and prosper is every elected local government official's goal. How successful he is at doing it is the standard by which his job performance is publicly evaluated.

People who draft development plans usually begin by creating a "vision" of what they want their community to be at the end of planning period (most often, three to five years) -- maybe a regional trade center, a tourist destination, or a center for education and medicine. Next comes an objective analysis of the current condition of the community, highlighting its strengths and its weaknesses. The plan then proceeds to develop programs and projects that build on those strengths and recognize those weaknesses. It is a road map that shows how to get the community to where it wants to be by the end of the planning period. If community leaders are committed to making the plan happen, its contents are an important consideration when they formulate and approve capital improvement projects during the annual budgetary process.

Doing a community development plan or periodically reviewing and revising one already done presents an excellent opportunity to get citizens involved and interested in local government. They should be consulted to find out what direction the community should move anyway. It's good politics to ask. Their involvement can be channeled through public hearings and special citizen task forces charged with actually producing parts of plan (like the vision statement or the section that describes how aspects of the plan will be funded). Inviting the public to be part of the process of developing a comprehensive community-wide development plan lends greater legitimacy to the plan and creates citizen-supporters for policies and projects it advocates -- something useful to have at hand when a public official is seeking the popular and political support he needs implement them.

4. ORGANIZING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Previous sections have presented a rationale for public participation. They suggest two things government does where citizen participation can be usefully applied: developing budgets and doing community development plans. This part describes how to apply public participation. There are many ways to channel citizen participation. Here, two are explored in some detail: public hearings, and citizen committees, advisory groups and task forces.

Public Hearings

These are usually single topic meetings about a matter of public interest. The public is expressly invited to attend. They'll likely hear an official presentation about the meeting's topic and be invited to comment on the matter at hand. It's a practice unusual in Europe, but dates from colonial times in America, where tradition generally requires the public to be consulted, or at least informed, about almost every public policy decision.

Public hearings should be held at times convenient to the public -- preferably on a weekday evening, so people who work during the day can come. If possible, the hearings ought to be held at places convenient for the public to go -- like a neighborhood center, instead of downtown at the city administration building. This reinforces the notion that the government is coming to average citizens, to ask their opinion about something important that has to be decided. The hearing ought to be advertised at least two weeks in advance: by word-of-mouth to community leaders, on the radio and in the newspapers, by written announcements posted in places the public will likely see them. Press releases that summarize the draft of the development plan or the budget and describe the process that will be used to present it to the public should be written and distributed. (If the press releases sound interesting, the government can get its public hearings announced in news stories, saving the expense of paid advertisements.)

There ought to be something simple, prepared beforehand, that gives general background information about the budget or the land use plan. It should be available for distribution when the public hearing is first announced so people can pick it up prior to the meeting. It should be printed in enough quantity to have plenty available at the hearings. These hand-outs accomplish two things: they tend to help focus an informed discussion of the subject at the meeting, and they afford an opportunity to get officials' names before the public one more time. (The pamphlets usually include names, titles and telephone numbers of the policy makers who are dealing with the issue.) If people want full copies of the draft of a development plan or a budget, they should be able to get them, but it is not unreasonable for them to have to pay for what it costs to make a copy of it.

It's hard to predict how many people will come to a public hearing. Seemingly important things like the annual budget may attract almost no one, while a discussion about part of the development plan that focuses on the location and design of a pedestrian bridge might attract a hundred people. The most important thing about doing public hearings is not how many come to them, but that people know that the hearings are being held and that they have been invited to attend them -- that their opinions are important and are being sought by their government.

Public hearings should be managed so as to last no more than two hours if possible. Most analyses of meetings indicate that a meeting's productivity really begins to drop off after it extends past ninety minutes. The most difficult aspect of doing a public hearing is to move the meeting along without giving the people who have come to it a sense that the meeting's sponsors don't have the time or interest to hear all their comments and opinions.

The chairman of the meeting should open the meeting -- on time -- by introducing himself, the people sitting with him (if any), and any other elected officials or administrators who are there. He should thank the people present for taking time to come to the hearing. Next there should be a brief presentation

by the city staff (no more than thirty minutes, preferably using visual aids of some kind) about the topic of the public hearing. Public comments will usually focus on some aspect of the staff presentation, so it's a good idea to anticipate the kinds of questions the presentation might generate in order to be prepared to answer them concisely.

Now it is time for listening to the public and answering the questions they raise.

Once underway with this phase of the hearing, its pace can be controlled by gently reminding speakers to keep their comments to the subject of the public hearing. If several speakers are repeating the same point, the chairperson might ask all the people at the meeting to show, by raising their hands, how many support the speaker's opinion. This allows people to indicate their point of view without necessarily giving the same testimony over and over again.

People make their comments addressing them to the meeting's chairperson and the officials sitting up front. People usually begin their testimony by introducing themselves. They should have a chance to speak into a microphone or in some way that assures that their comments are heard not only by the chairperson, but by the audience, too. The chairperson and the panel members up front can ask the speaker questions about what he or she has said, but care should be taken that these be questions of clarification only. People asking them should be sensitive about making testifiers feel badgered or intimidated, rather they agree with what they've said or not. This is the public's meeting; it's a public hearing. There's plenty of time at a subsequent city council meeting for members and administrators to air their opinions.

Every public hearing should be chaired by either the mayor, the chairman of the city council, or the government official assigned by the mayor to manage the process of developing the city plan or the city budget. Whatever the subject, it is important that all three of them come to every scheduled public hearing. This subtly demonstrates to everyone there how important the public hearing process and the development plan or the budget are, and it gives each of these three important people a firsthand indication of the public reaction to the development plan or the budget.

A few words are appropriate here about the kind of public reaction one should expect at public hearings. First, they are usually attended by a disproportionate share of pensioners, mostly because their circumstance allows them time to go to meetings and develop an interest in public affairs. Secondly, testimony will often seem to indicate the public is negatively disposed to the budget proposal or draft development plan. It's usual practice that public officials hear from the people who are not happy with what they're doing; the people who favor their programs are less apt to make an effort to tell them so. Public officials at the hearing should not base their opinions about the development plan or the proposed budget solely on the basis of what they've heard at the hearing. Among other things, a public hearing is a safety valve. For disapproving people, it's presented them an opportunity to have had their say on the matter directly to the people in charge; sometimes they even succeed in having a proposal modified; once in a while, scuttled. The hearing also allows officials to judge the political climate prior to making decisions, possibly learning how to minimize unfavorable responses to what they finally decide to do.

After everybody who wants to has had a chance to talk, public hearings conclude with the chairperson thanking the people who came to the meeting for their interest and their participation, assuring the people who spoke that what they said will be considered as the development plan or the budget is drafted in its final form and implemented, and explaining what happens next to the document and when it is likely to be officially before the city council for its consideration and adoption.

Someone from the city government should be assigned responsibility to attend the hearing and make official minutes of the meeting. Within one week of the meeting, short notes should be written to everyone who testified at the hearing, thanking them for their interest in meeting's topic and sharing their comments with city officials. (That's one of the reasons why it's important for speakers to introduce themselves before offering their comments or questions.)

The Advisory Group and the Citizen Task Force

Citizen committees provide some of the same things for the political system as do public hearings. They first became featured in democratic government as informal calls for public discussion of public issues but have gradually become more institutionalized, as aspects of decision making in public administration have evolved more and more to being one person's responsibility. In developed democratic structures, advisory committees with specific mandates and individual terms of office are increasingly replacing former elected or politically appointed governing boards and commissions.

These citizens' committees, advisory groups and task forces are usually made up of representatives of business groups and civic organizations who have an interest in the issue around which the committee is formed. They can often be appointed as an administrative matter, without the requirement of special legislation having to be passed and the mayor's appointments having to be approved by the council. In cases where the citizens' committee becomes an official, permanent and institutional part of the government structure, the important decisions these citizen-based committees are charged with making are subject to approval by either an elected mayor or the city council.

A planning commission is a good example of a permanent advisory committee that exists in most local government structures in America. Sometimes its membership (usually five to nine people) includes a council person or two, even the mayor, but they are always outnumbered by citizen-members (who often represent good government groups, environmentalists, financial and educational institutions, real estate development interests).

The planning commission's job is to consider proposals that affect the physical development of the municipality and advise the mayor and the council about what they should do about them. Commission meetings are occasions where public hearings are held about those proposals, too. People who own property around the area of the proposed project are expressly invited to attend them. The person or business sponsoring the development makes a presentation; the city administration offers an opinion about how the project fits with city land use plans (based on the development plan mentioned earlier). The public is offered a chance to comment on the proposal. These meetings are usually among the most well attended meetings cities do.

The people who have business dealing with planning commissions, advisory groups and special task forces are afforded a hearing before non-politicians, people even more like them than the people they elected. The officials who appointed them can override the decisions they make, so they've abrogated none of their constitutional responsibility or authority. Besides making the special interest groups represented on these committees feel their point of view is being seriously considered by the person who has to make an important decision or produce a planning document, a budget or an important public policy, using citizen advisory groups has five other positive spin-offs:

1. They will probably provide the public official with points of view he or she may not have otherwise considered. Their analysis will likely be more thorough than his would probably have been, and the resulting decision is often a better one.
2. Besides getting a different perspective on the problem, the city official, if he follows any of the committee's recommendations, often creates an expanded team of supporters when the attempt to implement the decision begins.
3. If the group recommends the policy favored by the person who has appointed them to the task force, the policy has been legitimized and ratified by independent experts.
4. When the decision or policy that has to be made is especially controversial, the advisory group gives the public official "political cover". The official can claim that he is basing his decision on the recommendation of the group -- his responsibility for making it is somewhat diffused.
5. The official has given the very public appearance of placing an important value on what the people who elected him or elected the people who appointed him think.

5. OUTCOMES

Inviting people in to watch you do your job and asking for and listening to their varied opinions about what you ought to be doing and how you ought to do it makes your job more difficult. It surely sometimes makes the decision making process take longer. But in a democratic political environment, the outcome (the policy, the document and all the decisions that are made along the way to implement it) has greater potential for broader public support, which is supposed to be the nature of outcomes in a democratic system.

No matter what stage the level of democracy in the country in which you work has been allowed by cultural or political considerations to reach, the people who make decisions and public policy almost all owe their positions to the fact that the people they rule have put them where they are. If they want to stay there, they have to establish some kind of positive, on-going relationship with eligible voters that transcends political campaigns and elections. They must either learn how to mold public opinion or how to determine its direction in order to run out ahead of it in election years. A public participation program like the modest one suggested here allows public officials to do both because it keeps them in touch with public opinion throughout their term in office.

Some politicians will argue: "People elected me to make decisions for them. If I make the wrong ones, that's what elections are for." Most of the people who believe that serve just one or two terms and are not around long enough to affect much that lasts longer than them. Citizen participation in government, even in its most vigorous form, should not be viewed as an imposition or something that renders a politician impotent. It takes away none of an elected official's responsibilities or authority. Citizen participation initiatives register public opinion. They produce views held by ordinary citizens that government ought to take into account in making its decisions.

Public participation is the blood that runs through the body politic in a democratic system. The public opinion it generates is an important influence on government because it imposes limits on the choices made by public officials. Elected representatives and the appointed people to whom they delegate parts of their responsibility make up the body politic's brain. A democratically healthy body politic can no more afford to limit citizen participation to occasional elections than the heart can act without the instruction the brain provides it; or the brain, without the blood the heart supplies it so that can tell the heart what to do.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

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Working in any area that relates to local government, public housing, or community development requires that you understand two things:

1. the organization's special and singular purpose: government -- services; housing -- decent, affordable places to live; community development -- quality of life enhancements
2. the environment in which these three entities operate -- where there are never enough resources available to provide all the services people require or expect

Local government organizations that do these kinds of things do their best work when they involve themselves in projects that clearly relate to their purpose and wisely direct their scarce resources (time, staff and money) towards that purpose. An effective management tool that can help them do both is strategic planning. A strategic plan is developed by a task force that not only includes people who work in government, but the people the government organization serves and representatives of public interest groups that are affected by what it does. The task force accomplishes its work through consensus decisionmaking.

The task force's members develop their version of a statement of organization's mission, its goals and priorities -- things that have to be determined by somebody, sometime in order to best allocate its scarce resources and get everybody moving in the same general direction, in a coordinated way.

The strategic planning process provides five significant outcomes:

1. it's a practical experience that shows government officials that involving the public in managing the public's business helps them do their jobs better,
2. it's a demonstration to everyone involved in the process that their ideas and opinions matter and can help make public policy,
3. it's likely a first-time opportunity for involvement in government's decision and policy making processes by leaders of other important sectors in the community (civic groups, business, cultural, and educational organizations),
4. it's a media event -- an advertisement for good government and a chance to show the public that it is conducting its business in a responsible, business-like way, and
5. it produces a written plan, developed by knowledgeable local experts, that a mayor, a council member, an administrator, or a member of a board of directors can consult when he or she has to make tough decisions about what to do when everything that needs to be done can't.

THE ELEMENTS OF STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategic planning is a process that has useful application in any organization, public or private. It involves several steps:

1. determining the mission or the purpose of the organization, and coming up with a clear statement that describes it
2. developing a vision or a goal for the organization that isn't necessarily easily attainable, but that is something to which everybody can relate
3. doing an honest assessment of the organization's strengths and weaknesses, mostly as those strengths and weaknesses compare with other organizations doing the same kind of work
4. listing the organization's most pressing needs, and suggesting ways to address them in order to accomplish its purpose and achieve its goals
5. developing programs and projects that address those needs and are built on the organization's strengths, whose implementation moves it consistently and constantly toward its goals and vision of what it wants to be

Every program or project that is included in a strategic plan is generally described, but those descriptions also feature three important elements:

1. timelines are set for each project
2. funding sources for each project are identified
3. responsibility is assigned to someone to organize and manage each project.

All of the projects described in the strategic plan have two things in common: they are rooted in one or more of the organization's strengths; every project's accomplishment serves to move the organization toward its vision of what it wants to become.

A strategic plan is usually developed by a large committee (10-20 people), appointed by the government organization's chief executive officer. This committee's sole purpose is to develop the strategic plan. The process is often managed by an outside facilitator whose two jobs are to keep the committee's meetings on track and focused and to enforce and enhance a consensus decisionmaking process among its members. The best strategic plans come from committees that are broad-based, its members representing a snap shot of the community and all its significant, responsible points of view. Being a political ally or a friend of the appointing authority should not be a criteria for appointment to the planning task force. If that happens, what the committee produces will be more government's point of view than the community's statement of what it thinks its government ought to be about.

The plan the committee develops is advisory. (That usually makes elected public officials more comfortable with the project and willing to try it.) But the plan should prove to be an important document that is frequently considered and consulted when policy decisions are made and resources are allocated. When the work of the committee is completed, the plan they developed is officially accepted by the council and government's chief executive officer, who widely distributes copies of it throughout the organization.

STRATEGIC PLANNING AS APPLIED BY LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Strategic planning provides obvious benefits to local government administrations and community development organizations. However, some decision makers (especially elected ones) may not always understand or appreciate these benefits. It is important to remind them that the strategic planning document is, like most planning documents, advisory but will prove to be a useful management tool. This defuses often unspoken concerns about giving up power and authority to a citizens committee. It is very important that the person who has principal responsibility for making all the elements of the strategic plan happen endorse the effort from its beginning. That person should also be involved in appointing the planning committee. In most local governments this is probably the mayor and the planning director; in housing and community development organizations, it's the executive director or chairman of the board of directors.

A typical strategic planning committee might consist of the following kinds of people:

- representatives from major factions on the city council
- someone who represents the mayor
- the city planning director, or his designee
- representatives of the following organizations:
 - large industry
 - small business
 - religious and cultural interests
 - regional government
 - senior citizens
 - education
 - tourism and hotel businesses
 - the chamber of commerce
 - housing providers, public and private
 - medical providers
 - labor organizations
 - service clubs

All the major responsible interests and sectors of the community should be represented on the committee in order for the strategic plan they produce to be the community's consensus opinion of what it wants to be and what it ought to be doing. The quality of the committee's product and its long range usefulness are largely dependent on its having been developed by a group that represents the full spectrum of community interests. The planning process creates an opportunity for civic organizations and politicians to work together on a project, which is probably something they have never done before.

It is not necessary to have a staff of experts assisting the committee, or for the committee to spend its time sorting through statistics. The planning committee's job is to develop a statement that describes the general direction they think their

community ought to be going and to make specific suggestions about how it can get there. It is management's job to follow the map they provide and arrange provisions for the trip. That is where experts are useful.

FACILITATING A STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

The process of developing a strategic plan is usually coordinated by an outside facilitator. Given the value this process puts on diversity of opinion and consensus decisionmaking, one might think that facilitating it is a daunting assignment. But when people who have been involved in a strategic planning process are asked to comment about the experience, they often make the same observation: seemingly irreconcilable differences of opinion usually have common elements, especially when they are all put in written form, put side-by-side before the group for everybody to see and compare. (This is a useful product of the experience all by itself.) Everything included in a strategic plan reflects the consensus opinion of everybody on the task force who has offered one. Every statement, project or program is based on common aspects of the full range of opinions individuals offer. What the process produces is a suggested direction or initiative the whole community can probably support.

The main qualities of a good facilitator are that he be a good listener and have better-than-average vocabulary, so he can readily come up with words and phrases that capture compromises. It also helps for the facilitator to be a good notetaker. Another part of his job is to put what has been discussed and agreed upon in written form. Every meeting after the first session should begin with a review of what has been discussed and agreed to at previous sessions.

The facilitator arranges the committee's discussion within a framework that corresponds to the strategic plan's outline (mission statement, vision statement, assessment of strengths and weaknesses, needs assessment, program development). When ideas and opinions lag or the tone of the conversation turns negative, the facilitator should not be shy about suggesting items for the committee to consider -- things he has seen or heard or read about that seemed to work in other places with similar problems. But the plan should be the planning group's plan, not the facilitator's. He just jump starts the process when it stalls.

After four to six hours of hard work spread over two or three sessions, the committee will probably have developed the first draft of its strategic plan. The more meetings the effort requires, the more attendance will dwindle. (That inevitably happens when the process extends beyond its first session, because the committee's work is so intense. If this happens, it should not be a major concern. The people who participate in all the meetings are likely to be the same ones who would have most freely offered ideas and opinions in each one of them had there been perfect attendance throughout the process.)

The facilitator writes a draft of the strategic plan the committee developed. The committee reviews the draft at its next meeting (usually its third or fourth). Additions and revisions are incorporated in a second draft, which the committee reviews at its last working session. The plan is done and ready to go to print.

OUTCOMES

The strategic planning task force formally presents its report to the mayor or the government's executive board. The strategic plan may also be forwarded to the city council. A good sign of government's commitment to the plan and the strategic planning process is for the council to formally adopt a resolution accepting the plan and acknowledging the work of the task force.

The strategic planning document may be useful to government in another way, besides it being an excellent management tool. The mayor or the director of a housing or community development organization can show the plan to state and provincial authorities and non-governmental organizations that might be able to provide grants to help fund some of the projects included in it. The plan describes an innovative approach to solving community problems. It demonstrates to outsiders that the community and its government know where they want to go and has some good ideas about how they can get there. The fact that it was written by a citizens committee representing a cross section of the community tells funding agencies that most of the programs and projects described in the plan have great potential for popular support (an important determinant of a program's success).

Strategic planning principles can be applied at any public organization. A public official's main interest is almost always doing more, better, with less. Strategic planning enhances his chances of accomplishing that. It's an excellent example of a good management practice that makes good political sense.