COMMUNITY
CONSULTATION

for

developers

PUBLIC INPUT TOOLKIT for Municipalities

Contents

This guide provides suggestions to help developers organize and implement a process to consult with communities. If you are reading this guide, we assume you are proposing a change in land use to a municipal council in Alberta.

1. The value of public input

When a municipality or municipal councillors review a proposed land use change, they must consider the expectations and perceptions of the surrounding community that may be affected by the change. When you have done an effective job of gathering public input, you make it much less likely that worried and uninformed constituents are calling their councillor to express concern about your project. You also help the councillors feel confident about their decisions regarding your application, and increase the likelihood that Council will support your project (assuming the project has merit that is obvious to councillors and their constituents).

Public input is not an "add-on" to your project. Instead, it is an integral part of the process of making application to the municipality. Most developers learn sooner or later that public input improves their project and hastens the approvals required before construction can begin.

Good relationships with your neighbours, and a good image in the community, will benefit your current project and future projects as well.

2. Communicate before you file your application

Before you submit your application to the municipality, there are some things you can do to help you be successful:

1. Talk with a municipal planner and a municipal councillor to ensure you know any requirements or expectations that may affect decisions about your project. Ask for information about the community and the people most likely to be interested in your project. Ask for any knowledge gained from recent experience in the municipality with similar projects. Ask if there are any spokespersons who have represented the community in discussions of comparable projects.

Tip: Start early. The longer you wait to contact neighbouring landowners, the greater the risk you will have unresolved concerns.

2. Walk through the surrounding community and talk with people. Learn about their perceptions of their community and (if your project is already public knowledge) your project.

3. Contact community spokespersons and get to know them. Learn their perceptions and expectations.

3. Communicate after you file your application

When you make your land use application to the municipality, you may be asked to notify affected citizens (usually surrounding landowners) of your application. If a change in zoning or subdivision is necessary the *Municipal Government Act* requires the municipality to notify affected property owners. This often requires (a) a sign posted on the property that informs passers-by of your application, (b) a printed notice in the local newspaper, and/or (c) letters sent to adjacent/affected property owners.
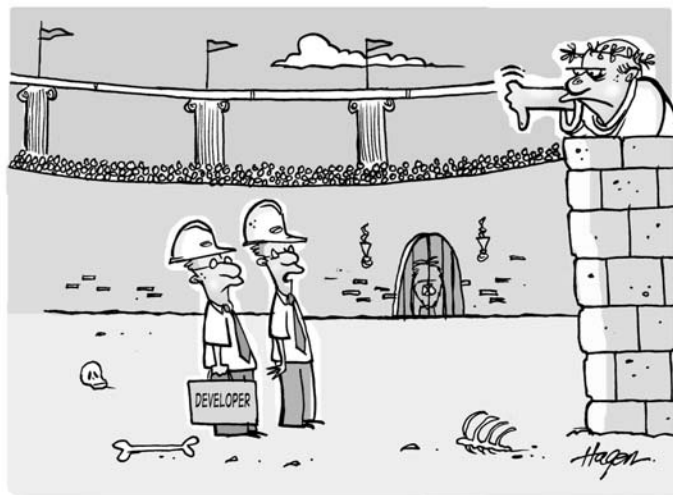
PERHAPS WE SHOULD HAVE CONSULTED WITH THEM FIRST.

You can greatly improve the likelihood of gaining Council approval, and community support, if you invest in communication and trust-building from the initial stages of your proposal. In established communities, people are likely to feel vulnerable to the changes they see around them: growth, traffic, density increases, and commercial land uses. Neighbours who know who is "behind" the project, and who feel their questions are being answered and their concerns are being addressed, are less likely to oppose a project and may even actively support it.

Reaching out to the communities around you can only improve your presentation to Council. The following activities are recommended for any development project:

1. Contact community leaders to let them know you would like to meet with them to ensure they are informed about your proposal. Let them know up front what the decisions will include (i.e. be clear about the scope).

2. Make it easy for interested persons to contact you (or your organization).

3. Learn what kind of "meeting" format will work best for people (time, place, length, discussion process).

4. Provide convenient opportunities for people to learn more about your project (i.e. hold meetings, maintain a storefront office, be available at the development site).

5. Return calls and e-mails, and keep people informed of any changes that may interest them.

6. Keep the planner and your local councillor informed about your efforts to stay in touch with the communities and their spokespersons.

In some cases, your proposal will require a significant public outreach effort. Key factors that signal the need for greater effort include the following:

- Scale of development (i.e. larger scale = more communication)
- Change of neighbourhood character (i.e. the proposal changes the scale, aesthetics or character of the neighbourhood)
- Perceived health or safety risk
- Perceived impact on lifestyle (i.e. blocks access to river, blocks view of foothills, brings "strangers" into the areas, includes late night activity)
- Moral issues (e.g. religion, gambling, sexual issues)

Greater public outreach means you may need to include communication and consultation activities in your project's plan. These include:

- Media relations
- Community outreach (personal communication with community residents)
- Preparation and distribution of informative materials
- Hosting meetings that help people get answers to their questions

Tip: Consider the "48 hour rule." No one should wait more than two days for a response to their question or concern. The sooner the response, the more you will be trusted

4. Plan to document what you hear

While consultation includes many informal conversations, it is important that you have an orderly plan from the outset. Plan to document your efforts to talk to people and the information you gather. At the end of the process, you should be able to produce a record that shows:

1. How you informed interested citizens about your proposal.
2. What opportunities they had to learn more and provide input.
3. How many people attended meetings and/or provided input.
4. What concerns or suggestions people raised.
5. Any adjustments made to your project as a result of what you heard.

This record demonstrates your commitment to good community relations, and will be helpful if later there is a difference of opinion about what was said and what was provided.

If you have taken time to learn about the surrounding communities, it is easier to put together an effective plan. Your plan will help ensure you keep a record of contacts and input received. It will also keep you on track toward the Council decision you are seeking. If you proceed "one step at a time" you may find the process takes longer and you are constantly reacting to new information and requirements.

Planning made simple

Ideally, planning begins with discussions about your project. As you talk to the municipal planner, councillors, and community spokespersons, start assembling a simple consultation plan. This can be done on a few pages, in a few hours. Here are questions you should answer in your plan:

- What decision are we requesting, and what are its implications for the communities?
- Whom should we be notifying?
- Whom should we try to get input from?
- What input do we require?
- How are we intending to gather the input?
- What resources and information do we need?
- What are our timelines?
- What is likely to be controversial—and how should we manage the controversy?
- How will we respond to the input we gather, and how will we present the information to the municipality?
- What outcomes do we seek from our efforts to involve the public?

Working with municipal representatives

It is always a good idea to ask municipal representatives for advice about how to proceed. Keep them informed—both the municipal planner (land use officer or development officer) and the elected councillor will appreciate your effort to keep them "in the loop."

5. Teamwork

Public input is an integral part of your project and requires teamwork. Several jobs must be done, and it is important to participants that one person does not attempt to do all of those jobs simultaneously. It is critical that there is coordination between your public input activities and your project design and management. You may have to contract people with communications skills to support consultation during the application review period. People involved in the project may bring excessive zeal to a public discussion. If citizens get the impression there is no flexibility regarding the "best" way to do the project, they may feel they are wasting their time talking with your people—and move on to talk to elected officials.

Skills that will be helpful in your project management include:

- Coordination – Someone to ensure all those little "promises" are communicated to everyone
- Facilitation – Someone to run public meetings, or to impartially hear what individuals have to say
- Communication – Someone to develop communication materials and meet with media
- Data keeping – Someone to record all public input

Consider having at least one person support the public input process on a full-time basis. For a brief period of time (usually about a month), there can be many calls and individual contacts to make. After-hours meetings are the norm.

6. Scheduling the public input process

Tip: Advance preparation is the key to good public meetings.

Usually, public input is tied into a specific schedule (for the approval of a project, or for the passage of a bylaw). However, implementing the public input opportunities can be a challenge.

Allow time for delays. The most common sources of delay are listed below:

- Approval of process or of public information
- Production (writing, artwork, printing) of public information
- Appropriate meeting rooms not available
- Research (ensuring accurate information)
- Public notification (media placements) or notification of stakeholders
- Re-drafting proposals after initial public input is received

In most cases, the municipal requirements for planning and development establish a clear process and timeline. However, other issues such as environmental concerns, health and safety, and utility and road considerations can alter time requirements considerably.

It is advised you develop an activity schedule that addresses the following four process stages. Ideally, these stages will be completed before you make formal application (i.e. while you are discussing matters with the planning officer or administrator).

Stage 1: Preparation	- Creating your initial plan - Building and training your team - Drafting public information - Making bookings for meetings
Stage 2: Information Exchange	- Communicating with affected persons, agencies or neighbourhoods - Gathering preliminary information before formal public meetings - Providing advance information to interested persons or agencies
Stage 3: Comparison of Options	- Presenting the analysis of potential choices to interested persons or agencies - Learning about their perceptions and preferences - This portion of the process usually involves: - Scheduled and unscheduled meetings - Telephone surveys - Distribution and collection of questionnaires - An interactive website - Noting and organizing the input received - Verifying what you have heard and addressing it in your application

Stage 4: Decision and Implementation	▪ Responding to the input received (possibly by making changes, or providing additional information)
	▪ Presenting the preferred option to the municipality in your application
	▪ Receiving the municipal decision
	▪ Determining what is required for successful implementation
	▪ Initiating implementation (note that interested citizens remain interested during this stage)

7. Good communication materials

Good communication materials are an essential part of the public input process. The key to designing good communication materials is to design the communication from the context and perspective of the receiver, rather than the knowledge and expectations of the sender. The key questions to ask are: "What does the receiver want to know?" and "what misconceptions might interfere with our conversation?"

Remember: The receiver may be confused by possibly conflicting "other" messages.

Write "open" information

If the information provided to people appears to "sell" one option solely, or in strong preference to other options, it may be discredited. Similarly, if information favours the perspectives of one community over another, it may become fodder for an argument.

Make the scope of discussion obvious

Be specific about what is "on the table" for discussion. If necessary, point out the boundaries of the discussion.

Keeping it simple

The toughest part of writing public input materials is deciding what to leave out. People will spend very little time reading the material—so be selective about what you need to say. It is often useful to keep the basic message simple, but then add detail and illustrations for the more intrepid reader, and for use in public discussions.

Illustrations are important

A "concept picture" or a process illustration will become a major discussion point. It will attract attention and improve memory of the information. Colour improves attention and memory. However, if four-colour production is too expensive, two-colour production is well worth considering.

Notification and distribution of information

The *Municipal Government Act* specifies a municipality must notify adjacent landowners of applications to change land use or subdivide land. In addition, it is common for municipalities to notify adjacent landowners about property development proposals. Therefore, you will be asked to pay for the cost of this notification as part of your application.

Tip: Building trust is just as important as gaining input. Focus on building good relationships, and plan to keep those relationships as the project proceeds.

Ideally, everyone potentially interested in providing input to the decision(s) you are considering will be notified, be aware of the coming decision(s), and be aware of the opportunity to provide input. You may choose to notify more parties than is required by provincial legislation. However, this can be challenging–there are a few barriers to consider:

1. **Information overload:** Most people receive so much unsolicited information they automatically discard or ignore the majority of it.
2. **Competing messages:** It is easy for people to confuse your message with others.
3. **Distribution costs:** It can be expensive to get information delivered directly to everyone who is interested

The municipality will usually purchase formal notification advertisements in a newspaper. However, you are encouraged to provide additional notification. No notification system is perfect; more than one notification approach is recommended.

Some notification methods that can be used to supplement public notices placed in newspapers:

1. Face-to-face discussion (or telephone discussion)
2. Direct correspondence (including e-mail)
3. Networking with community leaders
4. Presentations at meetings
5. Bulk mail
6. Media release
7. Displays, signs and bulletins
8. Media advertisements

8. Making public meetings enjoyable and effective

Presenting information

People who take the time to attend public meetings should leave those meetings feeling well informed. Here are some guidelines to consider:

1. **Your audience will learn more when you say less**

   The average audience member will be attentive for about 10 minutes (most speakers assume the number is 30 to 40 minutes). Start with the presentation you think you ought to give, then cut it in half.

2. **Few people memorize facts**

   If you attempt to present all the facts before people have a chance to ask questions, you will be disappointed with the level of understanding among participants. It is better for people to be able to ask about the facts as they consider the options being presented. Project staff can help people "find" the facts when they need them. Handouts are important because they provide a reference tool for participants.

3. **All the facts must be available**

   While your presentation must be concise, it is equally important that people have ready access to all the relevant information about your proposal. Remember, your presentation raises awareness; now people are more likely to want to know more. Open access is important.

Tip: The purpose of public meetings is not to "educate" people, it is to help them evaluate choices.

4. **People learn by interacting with staff and information**

   While people politely listen to presentations, their learning rate is relatively low. Learning is much higher when they are talking to others and examining information. People learn by seeing, hearing, touching and smelling. It helps when they are not sitting still for long periods. They usually learn more when conversation is "two-way," not when they are sitting still and listening.

5. **Some methods definitely help people learn**

   The following "embellishments" to a presentation will help people learn information and will increase participant satisfaction:

   - Connect the information to familiar situations or common experiences.
   - Use colour pictures and photographs (especially when they show familiar places or people).
   - Use humour to support key points in the presentation (this is different than telling jokes).
   - Show your own enthusiasm about the topic.
   - Ask others to contribute questions or ideas and pay close attention to what they have to say.
   - Make eye contact and smile.

6. **Other methods should be used with care**

   - Abstract graphics (graphs, maps, process diagrams) can be useful learning tools, if you understand that many participants will have trouble understanding the message encoded in the graphics. It looks crystal clear to you, but it may not make sense to others. You can overcome this difficulty if you use the graphic as a "prop" for your story, not as a self-explanatory learning tool.
   - Technical data is even more difficult for people to understand. Describe what experts have concluded from the data, but leave the data aside for questions. Those who ask questions about the data will be motivated to understand.
   - Case studies or explanations of experiences elsewhere can be useful occasionally, but they must be concise. Note that examples can be misinterpreted, so be cautious about how you link the example to your proposal.

One method should be avoided

Selling one solution as the answer, without reference to other options, raises doubt and resistance. The more enthusiastic you are about one solution, the more energy others will have to oppose you. Things will get worse if you respond defensively to criticism of your idea.

Selecting the meeting format

When you hold your public meeting, you can choose a meeting format based on the topic, the target audience, and your budget. The following section describes the most common meeting formats and provides some advice to help you choose the appropriate format and to implement it well.

Type of Meeting	Advantages	Disadvantages
Storefront or "over-the-counter:" allows anyone to drop in and discuss plans "over the counter"	▪ Citizen can choose time to drop in ▪ Citizen gets one-on-one time with project representatives ▪ Great if a small number of citizens have a high interest	▪ Input is often verbal and must be recorded ▪ Relatively time-consuming ▪ Cannot accommodate large numbers ▪ Caution about "busy periods"
Informal "doorway:" small meetings that are informed neighbourhood discussions	▪ Builds trust and familiarity ▪ Gathers in-depth information relatively quickly	▪ May require several meetings to cover all interested parties ▪ Requires skill on the project representatives' part to keep discussion on track and record advice and questions
Advisory committee meetings: invited representatives meet several times to refine and discuss options	▪ Allows time for members to get to know one another and "do their homework" ▪ Builds consensus about detailed recommendations	▪ Committee may not be accepted by all communities ▪ Committees can be construed as "under the table" ▪ Requires major time commitment
Round-table meetings: usually less than 20 people and include a formal agenda	▪ Promotes exchange of ideas ▪ Good format for consensus building, if well facilitated	▪ Limited number of participants at each session ▪ Must be well facilitated and recorded ▪ Can be perceived as a technique to "divide and conquer" ▪ Make sure such meetings are not seen as "closed door"

Type of Meeting	Advantages	Disadvantages
Workshops: participants can "roll up their sleeves" and work together to assess information and create recommendations	▪ Promotes group problem-solving and exchange of ideas ▪ Can lead to creative recommendations	▪ Requires extensive preparation ▪ Must be well facilitated ▪ Requires time commitment from participants
Town hall meetings: larger meetings with a formal agenda and formal presentations	▪ Involves many people at once ▪ Everyone gets to hear what everyone else has to say	▪ Media often attend because meetings can become confrontational ▪ Must be expertly planned and facilitated ▪ "Showboating" at the microphone is a problem
Open house sessions: an opportunity for anyone to drop in, review information, talk to a project representative, and submit their preferences	▪ Allows many people to review information and talk to representatives ▪ People can spend as much, or as little, time as they wish ▪ Non-confrontational format	▪ Will not result in any definitive input unless designed to do so ▪ Does not promote interaction or consensus-building among communities

1. If the decision affects only a few people, then you will naturally use one of the following methods to discuss matters with these people and to gain their input:
    a. Personal meetings (one-on-one, often with you going to them)
    b. Storefront meetings (generally over the counter with one or a few people at a time)
    c. Informal "doorway" meetings (meetings with less than 10 people, usually held in someone's house or business, with no formal agenda)

    All small meeting formats depend on your ability to give the people your attention and to provide credible information in a friendly manner.

2. If the decision affects more than 10 people, then you must choose whether you want to hold a series of meetings that anyone can attend; or whether you want to invite a representative selection of people to address the decision prior to the Council hearing (i.e. invited representatives participating in a committee or a round-table).

Tip: A public input plan makes it much simpler to do a good job.

Options are the basis for productive discussion

When you talk to citizens and municipal representatives about your proposal, try to define more than one way the project could be structured. If there are two or three options to discuss, then the discussion will be more about "which one is better" and less about "take it or leave it." Additionally, if others are encouraged to

think about the best way to approach your project, they often come up with very good ideas that will benefit the project.

Based on your early discussions with municipal and neighbourhood representatives, you can likely identify some factors that will most influence their perceptions about the project. These include items such as the following:

- Changes in parking or traffic patterns
- Changes in aesthetics (blocked views, shading, appearance of exteriors, greenery)
- Nuisance factors (noise, dust, odours, rubbish)

It is helpful if you display the options available, and provide comparative information that reflects the factors municipal and neighbourhood representatives are most interested in.

Retirement Facility Criteria	OPTION 1 85 suite facility	OPTION 2 120 suite facility
Range of services provided		
Green space & landscaping		
Parking arrangements		
Size & location of facility		
Community access to facility		
Construction costs & operating efficiency		

Mitigating development concerns

In many cases, public concern will focus on the disturbances created by a development, rather than the actual intended structure. In these cases, the public discussion usually focuses on mitigation options, rather than development options.

For instance, the discussion may focus on matters such as the following:

- Time of year when construction will occur
- Length of time when traffic will be affected
- Factors affecting noise concerns, such as type of equipment and time of day
- Alternate arrangements for affected households and businesses
- Communication with affected residents

- Safety controls around the site
- Visual barriers
- Landscaping and external appearance

Discussions about mitigation work best when they are more personal or informal. Community leaders can play an important role in identifying (and supporting) appropriate mitigation techniques.

9. Conflict and consensus

Although "conflict" sounds like a bad thing, it is a normal and desirable part of the discussion process. You wouldn't be going to all this trouble if you were sure everyone agreed about everything. Good ideas come from the exchange of different points of view. However, you are trying to avoid emotional outbreaks and accusations.

You do not have to have consensus from affected citizens and landowners about the best way to proceed with your project (although a consensus of support would make the Council decision easy). Your target should be to achieve credible documentation of the preferences and expectations of those affected, and to clearly show how you have responded (in a practical way) to concerns raised.

In many cases, people can live with the new project if (a) their proposals or preferred option is seriously considered (or adopted), or (b) acceptable mitigations, controls or compensations can be assured to address concerns they have in relation to the preferred option.

10. Following through

Never underestimate the amount of work you will have to do after the meetings are over and questionnaires are submitted. Take the time to congratulate your team on what they have achieved, but don't lose momentum.

Here are some tasks that typically require your attention after the input is received:

- Thank those who have helped you.
- Keep any promises made; do you need to send out any information?
- Collect and inventory all notes and input in one place.
- Ensure all input received is analyzed and summarized (this may require time editing and refining notes).

- Brief the project team as soon as possible and inform those responsible for the project of any concerns that might affect their planning, design or implementation.

- Inform municipal representatives and elected officials about the public input process and the advice received.

- Provide some information to the interested participants involved in your process. Let them know you appreciate their participation and give them some idea of what you have heard.

- If you have made adjustments in order to make your proposal more satisfactory, make a specific connection between what you heard and the changes you have chosen to make.

- It is a good idea to verify you have interpreted the public input correctly. Ask some (or all) participants to comment on the accuracy of your summary. It is better they make these comments to you than to councillors.

Role of municipal officials

Municipal officials are an important source of information about your project, so keep them well informed. Usually, they will not represent your project publicly, but they may attend public meetings and will often help explain the bylaws or the application process you are working within.

People must be informed about the decision and how their input was used as part of the decision. If an approach is chosen that is different than many people recommended, it is essential they are informed <u>why</u> another option was chosen.

Closing
the loop