

The What, Why, Who, How, When, and Where of Public Participation



What is it?

Public participation is the involvement of people in a problem-solving or decision-making process that may interest or affect them.

Why do it?

Believe it or not, involving the public can make your job easier. Involving the public has several practical, philosophical, and ethical benefits. Some of the more important reasons for involving the public include a desire or need to:

- **Meet regulations and requirements:** Many programs, laws, and rules require some level of public participation.
- **Adhere to democratic principles:** Our culture and society embraces the philosophy that people have the right to influence what affects them. As Abraham Lincoln said, our government is intended to be *of, by, and for* the people. Involving the public and seriously considering their input and needs is more often than not the right thing to do. Public participation provides a method for incorporating the public's ideas, values and interests into decisions, resulting in more responsive and democratic governance. Public participation also provides a vehicle for creating better citizens (Boyte and Kari 1996).
- **Improve the process of creating problems that can and should be solved:** Effective public action depends on finding or creating real problems that can, should, and are likely to be solved (Wildavsky 1979). A good public participation process can make such problem finding or creating easier, not harder. Although the front-end planning can be lengthier and more complicated, subsequent steps are often more efficient and some sources of delay can be avoided. Without good public participation, your process will more likely become entangled in legal and political quagmires – for example, organized protests, lawsuits about lack of due process, or legislative interventions. These are signs that individuals or organizations are unsatisfied with the process. Good public participation helps you:
 - Quickly identify key difficulties, challenges, or opportunities: Participation by the public early on and throughout the planning or decision-making process provides early notice that you will need to face certain issues, options, or opportunities. Participation may also point out quickly that you might be heading in a direction that is untenable. Generally, the sooner such information comes to light, the more useful it will be to you in your process and the less likely you will need to undo earlier work and decisions.
 - Create better understanding of the situation, problems, issues, opportunities, and options for action: For an effective decision-making process, both the decision makers and the public need to fully understand



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the situation, problem, issue, opportunity, along with available options. Public participation helps the decision-making process because it clarifies the definition of problem, provides a forum for sharing ideas and concerns, helps produce clear and accurate information, and brings people together to focus on what's worth doing.



- **Manage single-issue advocates:** Because public participation illuminates many issues and many viewpoints, it can help manage single-issue advocates. When people are part of a broad-based, interactive process, they usually understand better challenge of making decisions in complex situations involving many different views about what can and should be done. While their zeal for their issue will not diminish, they may allow space for consideration of other issues and needs.
- **Build better relationships:** Asking, considering, and involving people in work and decisions that affect them will naturally create and enhance relationships with them. These relationships – or “social capital” (Putnam, 2000) – may prove a useful foundation and resource for future work, including the work of implementing a decision.
- **Manage conflict more effectively:** A process that involves people early on, fosters better understanding, and builds relationships is also more likely to result in better conflict management. Such a process is more likely to be “hard on the problem and easy on the people,” focus on interests and not positions, respect the differences people bring and the contributions people have to make, and be able to create and atmospheres that welcomes win-win rather than win-lose solutions (Fisher & Ury, 1981; Thompson, 2001).
- **Build a coalition of support:** When people are involved in solving problems, making decisions, or creating plans, they typically develop a sense of ownership, commitment to, and stake in the results of those efforts and initiatives. Frequently, they will then become stronger advocates and help bring them to life. This may take the form of political advocacy, volunteerism, partnering, publicity, securing funding, and so on.
- **Get it right the first time:** If people have had their issues addressed and considered throughout the process, the resulting decisions should better meet their needs. Similarly, if the process, through public participation, has met their procedural needs, they should be more supportive of the decision. This diminishes the desire and capacity of someone to stop a decision either late in the decision-making process or even during the implementation phase. For example, many lawsuits to stop or delay a project are aimed less at the actual decision and more at failures in the decision-making process – because options were not considered, meetings were not announced or open, the analysis was flawed, and so on.
- **Enhance future problem-solving capacity:** A good process can greatly enhance, rather than diminish or poison, future problem-solving capacity. Building in the kind of “process gains” noted above makes it less likely that future problem-solving efforts will result in “process losses.”

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- **Better, more substantive decisions and outcomes:** Not surprisingly, the process improvements discussed lead to better decisions and outcomes. (Also not surprisingly, it can be hard to disentangle decisions and outcomes from the process used to create them.) Better results occur as a consequence of:
 - More information: A public involvement process brings more information into a decision-making process, including information that goes beyond scientific or technical knowledge. Knowledge of the context, institutions, history, and personalities is often invaluable (Scott, 1998). Especially important is gaining knowledge of stakeholder interests and concerns; that kind of political information that is absolutely essential for effective decision making.
 - More perspectives: The participation by a range of interested people adds more perspectives and expands options, thus enhancing the values of the ultimate decision. You are more likely to create a decision that meets more people's needs and considers more people's concerns if they have been involved in its formation.
 - Increased mutual understanding: Public participation provides a forum for both decision makers and stakeholders to better understand the range of issues and viewpoints. Thus it broadens their own knowledge base as they contribute to the decision.
 - Free consultants: In one sense, involved people serve as free consultants to your project. They may bring technical expertise, specific knowledge about how decisions will affect certain stakeholders, local experience and history, or other specialized experience.



Who is the “public”?

There are many “publics.” It is very important to do a good stakeholder analysis in order to identify those various publics.

How, when, and where do you involve the public?

- The nature and extent of involvement varies
- The time and costs of different types of involvement vary
- Participation processes should be designed purposefully and thoughtfully
- Preparation should start early
- Adaptation and follow-through are necessary
- Place matters and should be thought about carefully and strategically

Sources:

- Adapted from materials prepared by Mary Hamel, Public Involvement Counsel, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, November 2000.
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