

THE CHANGING FACE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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Traditional methods for involving the public in planning decisions are becoming increasingly insufficient as new models for collaborative decision-making emerge. Successful examples of public participation have demonstrated that broad stakeholder participation early in the process can save time and money by avoiding costly legal disputes and community resistance, and fostering a shared sense of ownership in the project. The challenge is to create forums for education and the exchange of viewpoints in collaborative settings, before stakes are raised and battle lines drawn. By creating such settings, expectations can be set for achieving consensus, as opposed to expectations for compromise and disappointment. Today, planners and decision makers have at their disposal an increasingly broad set of tools and technologies to inform, educate, foster dialogue and debate, and gather the input of the public. The process for rebuilding Lower Manhattan, and other examples from across the country, demonstrates a wide sampling of these tools.

Anyone who took part in the July 2002 “Listening to the City” meetings at the Javits Center was bound to be disappointed by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation’s (LMDC) return to a traditional public hearing in January 2003 at Pace University to discuss the nine designs selected in the “Innovative Design Study.” The old model, as we might optimistically call it, of the standard public hearing has many drawbacks. Typically, participants are given 3 – 5 minute time limits to state their business at a microphone before a panel of agency officials seated above them on a stage. Speakers often resort to charged language, and polarized, intractable positions to gain the attention of the panel or the press. Questions are not usually allowed, and when they are, it might be several weeks or months before an answer is issued. Finally, participants are unaware of whether and how their comments have been incorporated, as individual responses are not usually issued, and months may elapse before a general record of the meeting is published.

On the other hand, the old model public hearing is the most widely available format for public comment, and forms the basis for our public participation processes required by law in most municipalities. Public hearings have been conducted successfully to educate the public and gather input and support for land use decisions. One example of a successful series of public hearings is the extensive cross-acceptance process conducted throughout the State of New Jersey to gain support for the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan. This process dates back to

1986, when the first plan was initiated, and continues today, whereby each meeting of the State Planning Commission and its committees actively and continually seeks input. While not perfect, this case perhaps demonstrates the best of the old model that is available to us.

The new generation of town hall-style meetings, embodied in civic-sponsored forums such as “Listening to the City” and “Imagine New York” for the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan, was conceived precisely to respond to the shortcomings of the polarizing public hearing format. At “Listening to the City,” participants were seated at ten-person round tables with a trained facilitator who led a daylong series of discussion questions, utilizing the AmericaSpeaks model. Communities of color, people earning low incomes, residents of all five boroughs and suburbs of New York City, as well as young people and senior citizens were actively recruited for the meeting in order to create a diverse group of participants similar to the demographic makeup of the metropolitan region.

For “Imagine New York,” organizers chose to go into communities throughout the region to reach a diverse group of people, sponsoring 230 workshops scattered throughout New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. In both cases the conversations and exchange of viewpoints at the tables between people of diverse backgrounds was as important to the process as the information officially recorded for decision makers.

Technologies such as the internet, wireless communications and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) have aided both the old model public hearings and the new high-tech town halls. Using wireless notebook computers and polling devices at “Listening to the City,” participant input was instantly tallied and fed back to participants, decision makers, and the press, fostering immediate transparency and compelling responses from public agencies. A three-week “Online Dialogue” was held in conjunction with “Listening to the City,” which further broadened participation in similarly-structured discussions and polls online. Computer generated maps have been used to effectively visually communicate land use, demographics, and economic features from the national to the neighborhood level. As GIS software improves, more advocates and public officials are

A PARTICIPANT USES HER KEYPAD AT LISTENING TO THE CITY
photo: Jacquie Hemmerdinger



HANDS-ON COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS BRING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION TO THE STAMFORD, CT MASTER PLAN. DOZENS OF THESE WORKSHOPS WERE CONVENED BY RPA FROM 1992-2002.



able to communicate conditions, trends and possible futures with their constituents. Likewise, citizens are raising their expectations about the quality and clarity of information provided to them, thereby raising the bar for informed public discussion.

Perhaps the most significant recent achievement for transparency and inclusiveness has been the extensive civic participation from the very beginning of the Lower Manhattan rebuilding process. Groups like the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York, New York New Visions, Rebuild Downtown Our Town (R-Dot) and the Labor Community Activist Network have represented a new spirit of collaboration in the civic community and with public agencies. From “Listening to the City,” which was sponsored by the Civic Alliance with the support of the LMDC and the Port Authority, to projects of New York New Visions, such as their valuable, measured critique of the nine designs for the World Trade Center site, the participation of the civics has given the public better access to information and created a more responsive government and better-informed civic community.

Despite these gains for public participation, many challenges remain. Particularly, how can pressure be maintained to ensure that the concerns of new immigrants, low-income groups, and communities of color are heard by decision makers? How can public agencies be encouraged to continue participating in meetings where the results are not predetermined, such as at “Listening to the City,” even when these meetings may force them to scrap their plans and start over? How can civic involvement and interest be sustained in issues facing communities that are not as compelling as the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan, but equally important? Finally, are there new models, perhaps using the internet, that can take us beyond these examples to a more democratic, sustained paradigm for public participation? To answer these questions and achieve these hopes for broader public participation, the case must be made that public participation is valuable to the process, and merits the time, consideration, and money that a quality process requires.