Calming the Storm

Prepare for and respond to challenging individuals / groups at public meetings

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Our goal today: learn how to better prepare for and manage tough public meetings. These are meetings where

- members of the public are loudly voicing their concerns about the issue and may seem disrespectful *
- the atmosphere isn’t conducive to ‘getting the business done’ *

* And we’ll talk a bit about why that behavior can sometimes be expected.
First, a Poll Question

When you think about a public meeting with a challenging audience, would you say that ...

___ You knew it was coming

___ You were surprised
Why Are People So Disruptive At Public Meetings

• Lack of trust in public institutions and leaders
• A belief that they and their viewpoint are not being seriously considered
• A sense that this is the only way for them to get attention, to impact the outcome
• They are confused, misinformed or belligerent
• Poor handling of the meeting by leaders *may make things worse*
What is NOT community engagement?

• A single meeting
• A one-way conversation
• Asking for input on a decision that has already been made
• Something done only when it is legally required
Why engage your community?

• More civil discussions and decision-making

• Faster project implementation with less need to revisit again

• More trust – in each other and in local government

• Higher rates of community participation and leadership development
Better identification of the public’s values, ideas and recommendations

More informed residents – about issues and about local agencies

Improved local agency decision-making and actions, with better impacts and outcomes

More community buy-in and support, with less contentiousness
What is the Purpose of the meeting?

This is a key consideration for every meeting.

There is often confusion by attendees about what is going to happen at the meeting!

The purpose ought to be one of the first things talked about a meeting.
People can get emotional—angry—in three situations:

1. When they have been hurt
2. When they feel threatened by risks not of their making
3. When they believe their fundamental beliefs are being challenged

Dealing with an Angry Public by Lawrence Susskind and Patrick Field
Anger can be intensified when people feel:

• Weak or powerless in the face of others who have power

• Treated unfairly, disrespectfully or dishonestly

• Anger is a helpful way of rallying the troops, demonstrating one’s own power, or bullying others into accepting their point of view
Keys to Dealing with Emotional Audiences

• **Sharing Information**: This means that the board/council and the project proponent must share all information—the good, bad and the ugly.

• **Listening**: Acknowledging concerns is very important. It demonstrates that the agency and its leaders care about its residents and are willing to explore solutions to the problems that the project may create.

• **Learning**: Once core concerns have been identified, the process of addressing those concerns can begin. Leaders can ask the project proponent and concerned residents what steps might minimize the impacts that are of concern. Leaders can share their own ideas and seek reactions or refinements.

“As leaders and decision-makers, your collective goal is to have as many people as possible feel heard and that their input made a difference. Another goal is for the project proponent and opponents alike to feel that the process was fair and their leaders behaved in a trustworthy manner.”

OCDR Top Considerations for Public Engagement

- Relationship building comes first and remains at the center
- Know your purpose and design the meeting accordingly
- Plan, plan, plan
- Design to promote problem solving rather than position demanding
OCDR Top Considerations for Public Engagement

☑ Follow-up

☑ Remember the 4 C’s

  Competence, Caring, Consistency, Communication

☑ Set high expectations

☑ Create space and time to acknowledge missteps, anger, fear and difference
Final thoughts

• Remember to work with others on planning public engagement projects - they help you see other perspectives

• Have a plan ready just in case things go bad
  
  • Can someone offer to talk with the ‘disrupter’ out in the hall, or perhaps meet the next day to discuss their concerns?
  
  • Is there any concern for security?

• Call OCDR ahead of time to discuss possible strategies
Public Engagement Resources

Tools by Topic

- What is Public Engagement and Why is it Important?
- Planning Public Engagement Activities
- Difficult and Challenging Public Engagement Situations
- Best Practices
- Local Government
- Virtual and Digital Resources
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Evaluation and Measurement
- Case Studies
- Organizations
- All Public Engagement Resources
• IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum
  https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars

• Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and other Challenges to Public Engagement Processes

• Top Considerations for Public Engagement
  https://mn.gov/admin/assets/Top%20Considerations%20for%20Public%20Engagement_tcm36-440660.pdf

• Dealing with Emotional Audiences
  https://www.ca-ilg.org/dealing-emotional-audiences
Review of Questions and Comments in the Chat
THANK YOU

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https://mn.gov/admin/ocdr