

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

USDA Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

Social Sciences
Team

Public Meetings

Why Use Public Meetings?

Public meetings are a *formal* way to solicit input from members of a community. Concerns and important issues can be identified and discussed. Public meetings differ from other types of meetings in that they need to be formal and structured, involve open participation (there is no control over who attends since you are inviting the public), and can often address a variety of issues other than just the originally intended issue. When a public meeting is held in a community it is important for the individuals in charge of the meeting to make sure the appropriate issues are covered and decided upon. However, it is also important to be aware of and address other related issues that come up during the meeting.

Who Can Use A Public Meeting?

The Conservation partnership at the District/field level and other levels as needed.



When Do You Use A Public Meeting?

Sometimes, there are legal requirements that meetings be held. At other times, meetings may be held for the purpose of decision making, problem identification, and strategic planning. The process of planning and holding the

public meeting should involve as many people as feasible. Proper planning means running a meeting in a structured manner so that everyone can participate.

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How to set up and run a public meeting:

Checklist

1. Have someone volunteer to serve as the overall meeting coordinator.
2. Select an appropriate time and date for the meeting.
3. Arrange for a location where all interested parties can attend, or set up more than one meeting.
4. Ensure the meeting is well publicized in advance.
5. Prepare and distribute an agenda prior to and at the meeting.
6. Work to minimize conflict.
7. Prepare a “fact sheet.”
8. Distribute a sheet with ground rules.
9. Show an 8-12 minute slide show which describes the past and present trends and concerns in the Soil and Water Conservation District, and ask attendees to identify future issues.
10. Have people sign up to speak.
11. Use a structured technique such as nominal group technique or paired comparisons for priority identification to ensure everyone gets an equal vote.

How Do You Set Up and Run A Public Meeting?

Here are eleven steps that will help you set up and run a successful public meeting:

1. Have someone volunteer to serve as the overall meeting coordinator.

Someone needs to be in charge. This person could be anyone who has the time and commitment to make this project successful; e.g., the chairperson of the local District Board, a staff member of NRCS, or an earth team volunteer.

2. Select an appropriate time and date for the meeting.

Examine local calendars and consult with local leaders to ensure that other events or times will not interfere with attendance. The amount of time needed for meetings may be difficult to predict. When you have an open public forum you will not have control over the total number of people who will speak, and how long the discussion period will last. Still, you need to set meeting times for the part of the agenda you have control over and stick to these times. A cardinal rule is to start on time.

3. Arrange for a location where all interested parties can attend, or set up more than one meeting.

The location should be:

- familiar
- easily accessible
- spacious
- comfortable
- climate controlled
- well-lighted
- provide microphones if the acoustics are poor

4. Ensure the meeting is well publicized in advance.

Develop mail-out fact sheets for distribution two weeks prior to the meeting and also three days prior to the meeting. Distribute information in your own newsletter, other organization’s newsletters, phone, gas and/or electric bills, television, radio, posters, etc. Make direct contact with people in key leadership positions as well as key community residents who are not typical customers. Personally invite as many people to the meeting as possible.

5. Prepare and distribute an agenda prior to and at the meeting. (see sample on next page)

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Sample Agenda:

<u>Item</u>	<u>Suggested Time Allowance</u>
Welcome -----	5 minutes
Review & Agree to Ground Rules -----	5 minutes
Distribute and Review Fact Sheet (<i>see 7</i>) -----	10 minutes
Show slide show or other media presentation -----	15 minutes
<i>(From this point on, recorder writes down all ideas)</i>	
Community Voices (sign up to give statements) -----	depends on number in attendance
Community Voices (individuals speak) -----	(open to all who signed up, 5 minute statements)
Facilitated Open Discussion -----	Approximately 30-60 minutes
Identify priorities -----	30-60 minutes
Discuss follow-through and acceptance of responsibilities-----	30 minutes

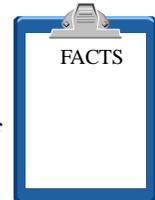
6. Work to minimize conflict.

The following roles are needed at public meetings: timekeeper, recorder, leader, expert, and facilitator. To ensure these people perform effectively remember these tips:

- Appointing people is far safer than asking for volunteers.
- A timekeeper who doesn't call time, is worse than no time keeper at all.
- A recorder who erroneously translates what people are saying can destroy a meeting by causing great frustration.
- Recorders need to accurately record ideas and display them for everyone to see.
- Facilitators must control the meeting, remain neutral, and ensure that anyone who wants to participate gets the opportunity. Consequently, enlist a conservation partner who has facilitation training or hire a professional facilitator.
- Experts are typically NRCS staff members. Use them on an as-needed basis. However, sometimes it is useful to use experts from outside of NRCS in order to present different perspectives.

7. Prepare a "fact sheet."

Include the past and present trends of natural resource use in your District. Also include the following: purpose of the meeting, assumptions you are operating under, and future actions you anticipate.



8. Distribute a sheet with ground rules.

The facilitator or leader needs to post and/or distribute the rules which can always be modified.

Examples of ground rules:

- each person can speak for no more than 5 minutes
- no one can give their time to another person
- written statements may be distributed
- everyone must be courteous to one another
- no one may interrupt a scheduled speaker or anyone else at any time
- all participants who wish to speak are given the opportunity to do so
- speakers who represent a group of people should state who they represent
- all votes are equal

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9. Show an 8-12 minute slide show which describes the past and present trends and concerns in the Soil and Water Conservation District, and ask attendees to identify future issues.

For Example:



- Use records to identify past trends.
- Use testimonials of people who have lived in the District.
- Indicate population changes over the last 10 to 30 years.
- Use slides to indicate examples of natural resource conditions, both positive and negative.

10. Have people sign up to speak.

Make sure public meetings are well publicized beforehand so people can sign up to speak. Enable sign up prior to or during the meeting. Speakers may distribute their speech in writing, or use any available media tool. It is always a

good idea to have media equipment that may be needed for presentations (i.e., slide projector, overhead projector, etc.)

11. Use a structured technique such as nominal group technique or paired comparisons for priority identification to ensure everyone gets an equal vote.

Structured decision making techniques such as the nominal group technique and the paired comparison tool ensure “one person-one vote” is respected. These techniques add a quiet orderliness to meetings by raising the stature of quiet or shy people, while at the same time, reducing the forcefulness of dominant personalities.

Where Can I Get More Information on Public Meetings?

- Running Effective Meetings, “People, Partnerships, and Community Series, Issue 5, Natural Resources Conservation Service, 1997.
- Leadership Identification and Group Dynamics, National Association of Conservation Districts, 1994.
- Cogan, Elaine, Successful public meetings : a practical guide for managers in government, San Francisco : Jossey-Bass, 1992.
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