

– GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING AN EFFECTIVE PUBLIC MEETING –

Public meetings conducted by a government entity, especially meetings conducted in connection with a strongly emotional issue, can be very effective for the government entity and at the same time satisfying for the public. Several key considerations will help ensure success.

1. Public meetings must be widely noticed; conducted at a convenient time for the target public audience; and held in an easily located, accessible facility. The goal of public meetings is to engage the audience by eliciting their opinions and preferences. Public transit access and easy vehicle parking encourage attendance. Refreshments are helpful but not necessary. Childcare is helpful. Multilingual translations are a great help where the audience is not native English speaking.
2. Public meetings should start on time, even if the bulk of the public has not yet arrived. Starting on time gives the audience some assurance that the government entity respects everyone's time. Since most public meetings are held in the late afternoon or early evening, starting and ending promptly will leave the audience time and energy to continue the discussion among themselves after the meeting. It also generates a good feeling about the meeting and what was accomplished.
3. The presentation of some introductory information is important. An outline of the issue, some background information, and possible courses of action should start the meeting. An introductory one-page handout is helpful. Excessive introductory information is less helpful, so a PowerPoint presentation or a large handout should generally be avoided. People can easily assimilate a summary of the issue and retain it as the meeting proceeds, but a long or detailed exposition should be avoided. Each attendee will develop an understanding of the issue as the meeting proceeds, using information from the government entity's presenters and discussions by other members of the audience.
4. Most of the discussion in a public meeting should be generated by the public audience. The role of the government entity is to present the issue; describe the constraints, if any; be prepared to answer questions or provide technical and legal guidance; and maintain a written record of the public discussion. The role of the public audience is to discuss the issue, present and share opinions and suggestions, and even to outline potential courses of action. The public audience should be featured, and will be a source of collective wisdom and knowledge.

The moderator, usually a representative from the government entity, should maintain order, but the audience must be encouraged to participate. Members of the audience can be recognized by the moderator more than once as the discussion unfolds. The moderator must hold speakers to a reasonable time limit, maintain a civil tone in the discussions, and keep order.