May 2018

Useful Community Development... quick notes

Inside: Community Meetings about Controversial Topics, Small and Mid-Sized Communities, Map and Chart Resources, New Web Pages
Visit us and explore at https://www.useful-community-development.org.

New Website Content This Month: Revised and improved: neighborhood plans, code enforcement introduction. Updated: urban sprawl solutions. New visitor questions were answered in pages titled Closed CDC meetings and transparency, how to select an economic development project, what to do when Zoning Board of Appeals reverses its direction, can codes help with condo sewage problem, HOA jurisdiction over backyard, impact of shiny solar panels on birds, reciprocal easements being removed

When Community Groups Must Discuss a Controversial Topic

Let's suppose that your community-based organization, neighborhood association, or town usually has calm and well-ordered meetings. If you're a leader, you're happy that things are just humming along nicely.

Then you are hit with a controversy, whether that is a police incident, a rezoning development proposal that has people lining up to oppose or support, a heated discussion about one-way streets, or an upcoming town council vote on bike lanes.

How do you keep your community meetings open, informative, and good preparation for voting on whether to suppose or oppose the measure causing all the discussion? Suddenly you may find yourself with a packed meeting room, and many people who are unfamiliar with your meeting style and expectations.

In our experience, we think these nine suggestions could save the day:

1. The officers and board should discuss how to handle the meeting beforehand. Sometimes you might want to bring in an outside facilitator from a non-profit or university if you expect tempers to flare or if the president is overly identified with one side or the other. Board members also should be especially careful to disperse

themselves around the room and to have agreement beforehand about who will be willing to step outside the room to talk with an agitated audience member. The board or executive committee also should discuss whether there are any circumstances in which someone would be asked to leave the meeting, and whether the president or facilitator will choose to close the meeting if raw feelings threaten future working relationships. As the discussion begins, the facilitator needs to explain the ground rules, which will enable most of the audience to help enforce them without the leader having to be the bad guy or gal all the time.

2. The facilitator, president, or some other leader should present facts about the situation, such as when a final decision will be made, the process for arriving at a final decision, how your own group intends to present the results of your discussion to citywide decision makers, any known timelines for the decision making, the results of any conversations with likely allies or opponents, and even your organization's history of success or failure with similar issues. This prevents frustrated questions from audience members who feel "in the dark."

3. At the beginning of the debate, the president should explain very clearly the goal of today's meeting (such as voting on a position, simply educating members, or discussing whether or not to take a position). If your organization will be holding a vote, make sure any questions about who is eligible to vote can be easily resolved. If only dues-paying members can vote, make sure you have the roll at the meeting, for example.

4. The facilitator must be careful not to give the impression that you are stifling debate or discussion. If you opt for time limits, you set up the situation in which speakers feel that their rights and sense of fair process have been violated; that only fuels anger. If the hour grows late and you must end the discussion, the president must express sincere regret at having to do so while remarking that many households have to worry about school and work tomorrow morning, for example. Meeting preparation should include making a plan on what to do if there is no resolution by the time the president feels that the meeting or agenda item must end.

5. The facilitator must slow down the action by being extraordinarily calm and light-hearted at the beginning of the debate and whenever the meeting becomes extra contentious. But the facilitator must be lightning-quick to respond with a request for more acceptable behavior if racist or other discriminatory remarks are made, or if personal attacks become vicious. As part of pre-meeting preparation, encourage board members to make helpful remarks at these particular times also.

6. Respect different learning and information processing styles in the room. Some people will absorb spoken information quickly, a few decide on an opinion quickly and never deviate from it, some need handouts, some want abundant visuals, and still others need time to reflect if alternative views are expressed and if facts are not generally known in the community beforehand.

7. If size of the group makes it impossible to allow everyone to speak in the meeting, consider giving people time for small group discussion, or even just asking people to share viewpoints with the person sitting next to them. This way everyone has the potential to influence at least one other person.

8. Neighborhood-scale leaders often feel they should handle everything themselves, but it is very wise to let the entire group handle disruptive people. For instance, if one person or one viewpoint wants to dominate the discussion, the leader can ask whether people need to hear more in order to make up their minds. If the group is tired of hearing from one person, they often will shout no! Similarly, if someone expresses an extreme position, asking the group if others feel the same often will make clear that the annoying speaker is an outlier.

9. Lastly, the discussion leader should feel empowered to bracket comments about past insults to your neighborhood by saying that old conflicts can be addressed at a later date and requesting that speakers stay focused on the current situation.

What's New in U.S. Federal Incentives for Small, Mid-Sized Communities

The First and Main organization of elected officials in small and mid-sized towns and cities has released its Blueprint for enhancing communities by improving prosperity. The program, which your local elected folks can sign, aims at protecting effective federal programs, improving the functionality of others, and establishing new funding initiativess to address gaps. One of the latter caught our eye in particular. It reads: Create neighborhood rehabilitation and investment tax credits.

Yes, a new federal funding source for rehabilitating buildings would be most welcome, especially when focused an incentive to invest in smaller communities.

We're wondering whether and how such a new grant program, if enacted, might dovetail with the new Opportunity Zones, which were created by last year's Tax Cuts

and Jobs Act. Opportunity Zones are designated by governors based on the law's criteria. In what we view as a positive step, all types of census tracts, from rural to urban, were eligible for designation. If you haven't heard about these, here's the best short article we've seen so far.

Because the funding is indirect, in the form of preferential tax treatment for investments, it will take a considerable amount of time before we can evaluate this approach. Opportunity Zones are being approved by the Treasury Department now. Keep up to date through the FAQ page and the links you find there.

Map and Chart Resources on Equality of Opportunity

Here's an interesting resource for those of you who like maps, graphs, and data to analyze. Yes, it's an academic website, but all of you reading this are well able to understand the straightforward maps and graphs about economic opportunity in the U.S. For example, right now on the neighborhoods page of the Equality of Opportunity project, you can see a map of the degree to which counties afford upward economic mobility, and you can see a graph clearly showing that the sooner a child moves to a better neighborhood, the more positive impact that neighborhood has on life chances.

Also you'll see a great chart on the cities where growing up in a particular metro area has the greatest impact on children in lower-income households. Sometimes that impact is positive and sometimes negative. Fascinating stuff if you are interested in racial equity (and you'd better be if you live in the U.S. where white babies were in the minority for the first time in 2012).

An interesting county-by-county map of hunger in America can be found at http://map.feedingamerica.org/. Digging into the surrounding pages, you can discover the methods behind the map. You can change the map to congressional districts and isolate child hunger and other data sets that might be useful to you. For example, you can see the amount of extra income that would be needed to eliminate what experts call food insecurity--the inability to afford enough healthy food.

If you're considering an inclusionary housing initiative, the Grounded Solutions Network has launched a helpful map and database of American programs.

Competition for Funding of Projects on Expanded Economic Opportunity

If your organization has a relevant track record and is a recognized non-profit of some stripe, you should consider applying for the [Communities Thrive Challenge](#), which will award a million dollars to one local U.S. project to expand economic opportunity for people not now able to earn a decent living. Up to 20 finalists each will receive $5,000. This project of the The Rockefeller Foundation and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative isn't a typical grant competition but is worth considering. You must register by June 12 and complete your application by June 19.

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