

Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS

Meetings—formal and informal—are the backbone of a public participation program. People like and need firsthand opportunities to discuss agency programs and plans.

Why are meetings important?

Meetings provide a time and place for face-to-face contact and two-way communication—dynamic components of public involvement that help break down barriers between people and the agencies that serve them. Through meetings, people learn that an agency is not a faceless, uncaring bureaucracy and that the individuals in charge are real people. Meetings give agencies a chance to respond directly to comments and dispel rumors or misinformation.

Far from being passive gatherings, meetings are interactive occasions when people discuss issues of consequence to them and their neighbors, listen to opposing viewpoints on the issues, and work together for the common good. Agency staff people who handle public meetings need to be trained in skills that encourage interaction and also keep the process focused and productive.

Do agencies have options in organizing meetings?

The particular circumstances of a plan or project determine the type of meeting that is appropriate, when it is held, the way it is organized, and how it is conducted. Most meetings work best when they are adapted to a specific purpose—for instance, for stakeholders in a proposed project or plan to monitor its progress and effects, or for an agency to build consensus and support. Because they demand time and effort from all participants, meetings must be planned and implemented carefully. Options for organizing meetings are described on the following pages:

- A. Determining the type of meeting;**
- B. Selecting an organizing feature for a meeting; and**
- C. Taking initial action steps.**

Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS

A. DETERMINING THE TYPE OF MEETING

The type of meeting, its timing, and its level of formality are determined by its purpose in the overall public involvement effort. An effective strategy tailors meetings to the target audience, the corridor or region, or the types of stakeholder groups—and, in some instances such as public hearings, to the legal requirements.

Scheduling for a meeting depends on what information participants need and when they are likely to need it, as well as on when agencies need information from the public. Sometimes a series of meetings is appropriate:

- A kickoff session;
- Periodic meetings throughout the process, especially timed with major planning milestones and decision points; and
- A meeting or meetings near the end of the process

The underlying principle is to provide timely and adequate opportunities for participation.

Flexibility is crucial. Agencies may vary meeting types to grab attention or focus on specific elements of a plan or program. Near the completion of a process, if an agency is legally required to hold a public hearing, it may choose to prepare potential participants with further informational gatherings and discussions. In cases where time is insufficient, agencies might schedule another date when discussion can continue.

Agencies tailor the type of meeting to its substance and purpose, as outlined below:

- **Public meetings/hearings;**
- **Open houses/open forum hearings; and**
- **Conferences, workshops, and retreats.**

PUBLIC MEETINGS/HEARINGS

How do meetings and hearings differ?

Public meetings present information to the public and obtain informal input from community residents. Held throughout the planning process, they are tailored to specific issues or community groups and are either informal or formal. Public meetings have been used for many years to disseminate information, provide a setting for public discussion, and get feedback from the community. Over 100 public meetings were used to develop a subway extension in Boston. While the technique itself is not innovative, some creative applications are being made. For example, Delaware used public “exhibits” in an informal open house format with one-on-one discussions as a focal point of each phase of a highway planning effort.

A public hearing is a more formal event than a public meeting. Held prior to a decision point, a public hearing gathers community comments and positions from all interested parties for public record and input into decisions. Public hearings are required by the Federal government for many transportation projects and are held in transportation planning at the discretion of the sponsoring organization. Public notices in a general circulation newspaper cite the time, date, and place of a hearing. The period between notice and hearing dates provides time for preparing comments for submission to an agency. During this period, the agency accepts questions and provides clarification. The Georgia Department of Transportation (DOT) expands the question-and-answer period by holding an open house in conjunction with a public hearing. (See [Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).)

Meetings and hearings have these basic features:

- Anyone may attend, as either an individual or a representative of specific interests;
- Meetings may be held at appropriate intervals; hearings are held near the end of a process or sub-process before a decision;
- Hearings require an official hearing officer; meetings do not;
- Hearings usually have a time period during which written comments may be received; and
- Community comments are recorded in written form as input to an agency.

Why are they useful?

Meetings and hearings are forums for receiving community comments. Both are widely used to achieve a basic level of community input and to exchange information with a wide representation of community residents.

Public meetings are optional events and thus tailored to agency and community needs. Public hearings, by contrast, are frequently used to fulfill regulatory requirements. Meetings and hearings can, however, be linked. For example, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) in both Atlanta, Georgia, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, held multiple meetings on a transportation improvement program (TIP) at local public review meetings, followed by a public hearing at the MPO level.

Public meetings are flexible and can be held as part of MPO or statewide planning or part of a single project. There can be multiple sessions on a single topic: the Kentucky DOT held community meetings on the State TIP over a three-month period. Meetings can be held in multiple locations, as can hearings.

A public hearing is a single opportunity for people to be heard. If held at the end of a process without other opportunities for involvement, it does not provide opportunity for early and continuing involvement as described in Federal regulations. More frequent community input is essential to agencies and more satisfying to people as a means of meeting participation requirements and goals. In Seattle, for example, the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) took part in more than 1,000 community meetings, forums, open houses, and hearings to provide information and receive public input on

the Regional Transit Plan. As part of this effort, agency representatives participated as guest speakers in meetings of groups such as the MPO.

Do they have special uses?

Each meeting or hearing facilitates participation. Scheduling these opportunities demonstrates progress toward involving community residents in projects and programs. They provide a place to identify positions and report a consensus or divergence of opinion to an agency. In Brisbane, California, a “Have Your Say Day” was held to obtain individuals’ ideas for the city’s planning efforts.

A single meeting can address several related projects or community planning issues. This is more efficient for agencies, in terms of both staff time and mailing costs, and it helps avoid participant burnout, particularly when many of the same people are interested in several projects or plans. Joint meetings also help to place individual project issues and goals within a broader community context. For 10 projects along the San Francisco waterfront, the city created a Waterfront Transportation Projects Office that coordinated all the city agencies involved. The office used a common mailing list, coordinated newsletters, and joint meetings. Through this cooperative effort, participants saw their specific concerns in relation to the “big picture.”

Who participates? And how?

All community people can participate in meetings or hearings. In some instances, participation is structured, either within larger meetings or for geographic areas. Both the Baltimore and Washington, D.C., MPOs provide time for formal public comment periods (15–20 minutes) at each of their meetings. In Portland, Maine, the MPO received input from neighborhood associations. The New Orleans MPO made special efforts to reach out to businesses by sponsoring two major conferences dealing with transportation issues of interest to businesses. The Mobile, Alabama, MPO brought in Chamber of Commerce representatives to review TIP projects and worked with them and others to forge a consensus. Meetings, but not hearings, can be focused on particular groups.

How do agencies use the output?

Meetings and hearings help monitor community reactions to agency policy, proposals, and progress. By observing reactions at periodic meetings or at a hearing, agencies and people are made aware of opinions and stances. If public meetings are held early in the process, these opinions may be analyzed and responded to before they become solidified or difficult to modify. Public hearings provide formal input to decisions.

Meetings can become a driving force for technical work. The MPO of Dane County (Madison), Wisconsin, devoted one year of a three-year, long-range planning process to responding to community input and comments brought up at a series of meetings scheduled throughout the period.

Who leads public meetings or hearings?

Meetings may be led by an agency staffer or a member of the public. In some instances, it may be appropriate to hire a professional facilitator to lead a meeting, especially if the issue to be discussed is highly divisive or controversial. A “discussion document” helps prepare people for participation if distributed prior to public meetings, as is done in Los Angeles.

By contrast, hearings are led by a public hearing officer, who is an agency representative. Agency staff helps disseminate information, particularly when a public hearing is combined with an open house. Virginia DOT publishes a step-by-step guide for open house public hearings, emphasizing that people

can attend at a time of their own choosing and can present comments either formally or informally, as desired. The Georgia DOT reports that proportionally more citizens make comments at open forum public hearings.

What are the costs?

Resource and staff needs can be substantial, depending on the type of meeting. Delaware's exhibit meetings were heavily staffed—16 to 18 professionals were stationed throughout the room to answer questions and determine the concerns of the 300 to 500 people who attended each event. In a meeting or hearing preceded by an open house, displays of major elements of a plan or process are required for full explanations to community residents. Sketch overlays, notepads, or comment sheets are needed to record public comments at the meeting.

How are they organized?

An agency organizes a public meeting or hearing and prepares pre-meeting materials, including meeting announcements and agendas, displays, audio-visual materials, and any mailings or publicity that are necessary. The public should be made aware of the free access to these materials. (See [Public Information Materials; Mailing Lists](#).) In San Diego, the MPO publishes an agenda and monthly digest of its meetings for public distribution. Agencies consider the needs of people with disabilities and transit access in selecting a convenient place and time.

An agency or community people may want to set up ground rules for meetings. These include:

- Recognizing the legitimacy of others' concerns;
- Accepting responsibility for coming to a meeting prepared for discussion;
- Listening carefully and sharing discussion time with others;
- Encouraging everyone to participate;
- Discussing with intent to identify areas of agreement, clarify differences, and search for common understanding; and
- Establishing a speaker's time limit.

For a public meeting, an agency provides meeting summaries in written form, describing areas of agreement and disagreement. All points of view must be clearly and fairly stated. A hearing transcript is formally prepared, based on a stenographic record or tape.

How are they used with other techniques?

A media strategy is always necessary for either a public meeting or a public hearing to attract the widest possible audience. (See [Media Strategies](#).) For example, adequate advertising for public events always includes more than a single newspaper advertisement. During a public meeting, a brainstorming, visioning, or charrette technique may be used. (See [Brainstorming; Visioning; Charrettes](#).) A facilitator may be appropriate. (See [Facilitation](#).) Special provisions need to be made to comply with the needs of disabled people for access to the meeting. (See [People with Disabilities](#).) Video or audio tapes of proceedings are important for analytic or other purposes. (See [Video Techniques](#).)

An open house is similar to a transportation fair, for either a public meeting or a public hearing. Presentations, slide shows, and one-on-one discussions continue throughout the event. Exhibits are laid out as a series of stations: a reception area; a presentation area for slide shows or short talks; areas for one-on-one discussions between community people and agency staff members, and displays of background information, activities to date, work flow, anticipated next steps, and an array of primary subject panels. (See [Transportation Fairs; Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).)

What are the drawbacks?

A public hearing is an insufficient level of public involvement when held at the end of a process and not accompanied by other opportunities to participate. In such a case, community members feel their concerns cannot be addressed because they are heard too late and have little chance of being integrated into the final decision. At open house public hearings, although people may present views publicly, they are heard primarily by the agency and not by other participants. Such hearings in Delaware include time for speakers to talk in front of others who may have conflicting viewpoints.

Public meetings do not always allay community doubts about agency credibility. Although they improve the possibility of adequate public involvement, meetings must be frequent enough and well-focused enough on issues to demonstrate agency concern about public involvement. In addition, an agency needs to make clear the link between meeting input and decision-making. Public meetings must be held early in the process and reasonably frequently thereafter to dispel fears that they are perfunctory or that an agency is not listening to community concerns. Large meetings or formal hearings may intimidate people and restrain commenting.

A very small percentage of the public attends public meetings, so such meetings should be only one component of a more comprehensive public involvement program.

For further information:

- Atlanta Regional Commission, (404) 364-2500
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- City of San Francisco Chief Administrative Office, (415) 554-5782
- Dane County, (Madison), Wisconsin, (608) 266-4137
- Delaware Department of Transportation, (302) 739-4348
- Georgia Department of Transportation, (404) 986-1360
- New Orleans Metropolitan Planning Organization, (504) 568-6611

OPEN FORUM HEARINGS/OPEN HOUSES

What are open houses and open forum hearings?

An open house is an informal setting in which people get information about a plan or project. It has no set, formal agenda. Unlike a meeting, no formal discussions and presentations take place, and there are no audience seats. Instead, people get information informally from exhibits and staff and are encouraged to give opinions, comments, and preferences to staff either orally or in writing.

An open forum hearing expands a public hearing to include elements of an open house. In addition, after reviewing exhibits and talking with staff, participants can comment on a proposal for the formal transcript of the public hearing. Open forum hearings require formal notice, even though the hearing itself is informal.

Open houses and open forum hearings have the following common characteristics:

- Information is presented buffet-style, and participants shop for information, including graphics, maps, photos, models, videos, or related documents. Space is allocated for tables or booths, and information is mounted on walls. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)
- Agencies reserve table space for comment sheets where people write their opinions. Participants turn in comment sheets at the time or mail them in later. Pre-paying postage for comment sheets increases the likelihood they will be returned. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)
- Agency or technical staff people are present to answer questions or provide details. Often at least one person staffs each table, but agency representatives also are positioned at displays or roam throughout the room.
- These events can be used for either a planning process or project development.
- Since there is no fixed agenda, these events are usually scheduled for substantial portions of a day or evening, so that people can drop in at their convenience and fully participate. Hours should be clearly set and well-publicized. In areas where people work in shifts, open houses/hearings can be scheduled to overlap the shift changes.
- Brochures or videos introduce the open house/open forum process. (See [Video Techniques](#).)
- Agencies usually provide take-home written materials, brochures, or maps. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)
- These events can include non-agency displays. Sister agencies and community proponents or opponents may be given space to present a point of view, displays, documents, or handouts in separate, visible areas. Some agencies have found that allowing public groups to set up tables outside the meeting or hearing room helps the public distinguish official agency information from other sources.

In addition to having all the features of an open house, an open forum hearing has the following distinctive characteristics:

- A formal public notice of a fixed time and date must be published.
- People have a chance to clarify individual comments by reviewing materials before putting their opinions “on the record.”

- Comments are formally recorded. People can comment orally before a designated staff person or court reporter, or they can write opinions on comment forms at the time of or after the event and return them prior to the announced deadline. (See Public Opinion Surveys.)
- The transcript of comments is made available to interested people after the event.

Why are they useful?

Open houses and open forum hearings provide an informal, casual, and friendly ambience.

People drop by at their convenience, get the information that interests them, and stay as long as they wish. Informality encourages participants who are intimidated by formal meetings to attend and give input; often the quality of responses is higher. The short time required for participation attracts people who do not want to sit through long public meetings.

Participants have many opportunities for questions and for detailed answers. One-to-one conversations between agency staff and participants encourage information exchange and foster courtesy and attentiveness. Question periods have no strict time limits.

Participants have direct interaction with staff who might not otherwise be readily available. Making technical staff available shows an agency is open to community input. It allows for an informal exchange of information, with everyone learning from each other. People can receive immediate responses to questions about issues. Technical staff is available to reduce misinformation and rumor. The New Mexico Department of Transportation (DOT) includes a local district engineer in its open houses on planning topics to address immediate project concerns. The Arizona DOT used a series of open houses at various locations throughout the State to develop the statewide transportation plan.

The format focuses on issues rather than positions. This focus allows participants to consider strategies to help an agency identify issues and propose solutions. Participants may request information and comment on a proposal.

Open houses can be tailored to participants' specific needs. They are held as necessary to improve public understanding of a process or project. Graphics or other materials are prepared to directly address issues of public concern. The California and Nevada DOTs held a joint open house on the I-80 Rail Corridor Study, which included maps and displays with a video on potential new rail equipment for operation in the corridor.

Do they have special uses?

Open houses help get a community interested in programs, plans, or projects. The publicity and the procedure call attention to a process that is underway. For a Cleveland, Ohio, light rail transit project, open houses were scheduled to gain name recognition for the project and to call attention to the potential of the line.

Open houses are used when a project is complex. A project can be broken into smaller pieces to enhance understanding. Detailed information is presented graphically or in text. The format allows plenty of time for people to see displays and documents close-up. Agency staffers give oral information to supplement displays.

Open houses are held at an early stage in planning or project development to gather information from people. Further along in the process, they update this information or seek comments on the progress of a draft plan or a project. The Pennsylvania DOT used a combination of open houses with workshops to develop issues, goals, and specific policies for its long-range transportation plan.

Open forum hearings are used primarily with projects, although a State or a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) may choose to call a public hearing for other purposes. During the environmental process for a project, the Nevada DOT uses the open forum format for an “informational hearing” at the beginning of the process and for a design public hearing at the end of the process. The Nebraska DOT holds formal public hearings at the location stage of a project and open forum hearings at the design stage. The Georgia DOT uses open forum hearings for virtually all of its projects. If attendance is large, the Department gives out numbers for those wanting to speak during the event and make their comments before court reporters.

Who participates? And how?

Anyone interested in a plan or project development can attend. New Jersey Transit used open houses as an integral part of its major investment study of a potential Monmouth–Ocean–Middlesex Commuter Rail Line.

Individuals with a specific stake in an issue are urged to attend. They are especially encouraged to attend open forum public hearings and make their opinions known.

Open houses or open forum hearings accommodate people who are reluctant to speak in front of an audience. Casual settings are not as intimidating as a public meeting with a large audience. Participants are encouraged to ask questions. The Orange County, California, transit agency provided bilingual staff at an open house in connection with a major investment study. Staffers were identified by blue dots on their name tags.

The media should be encouraged to attend. Information provided is generally comprehensive and may include useful visuals. Staff people involved in the project are available for details. People give their opinions of agency proposals or projects.

Stakeholders prepare visual and written materials to make their viewpoints known. Space can be made available for community viewpoints expressed in documents or graphics. At the invitation of the Tennessee DOT, American Indians and environmental groups teamed up to display their own materials at a table during an open forum hearing. People representing these groups were present to discuss their position.

People interact directly with staff. To get a “true” sense of a meeting, public hearing officers circulate around the room, listening to questions and answers. Circulating also gives staff members a chance to “relieve” others who are being monopolized by one person. The Tennessee DOT uses a court reporter and comment cards at hearings, along with a two-week period for further comments by letter, petition, or note.

How do agencies use the output?

Agencies use community comments for guidance in planning or project development. Comments help an agency take the pulse of the community, shape and modify plans, and monitor reactions of the individual stakeholders most affected by the proposal or project. Participants in the Orange County, California, transit agency’s open house provided advice on how to best structure the subsequent public involvement program.

Agencies review comments and incorporate them into the work wherever possible. They also provide responses for the record to document and acknowledge receipt of public input. For open forum public hearings, comments and responses form the bulk of the formal transcript of a session, which also includes the agency brochure, summaries of agency displays, a transcription of oral comments, and copies of all written comments.

Who leads the process?

Agency staff members always take the lead for hearings and usually for open houses as well. They are responsible for organizing the session, setting up materials, getting staff to the session, recording the testimony, and documenting the process and community attendance. Staff members also respond to comments made at the session.

Agency representatives with expertise in the issues staff the tables at open house sessions. Technical experts or consultants may assist in the process. At open forum hearings, a public hearing officer is appointed by the agency to assure a session's smooth operation and the agency's response to comments.

What are the costs?

Open houses and open forum hearings involve significant staff time in preparation and reproduction of materials, such as displays, graphics, brochures, and other materials. (See [Public Information Materials; Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks](#).) Significant staff work on publicity efforts is required to make a session successful. (See [Media Strategies](#).) Staff can be briefed to assure that similar questions receive the same answer.

Open houses and open forum hearings are minimally expensive or more elaborate. Expenses increase with the complexity of the project and the scale of graphics or display materials required. Special large graphics dramatize the elements of a project. Expenses also increase as an agency makes extra effort to publicize the event.

Staff needs to be present at sessions held outside normal working hours. If consultants are involved, their contribution is helpful during complex projects or processes.

A hall is needed for the event, and rent may be required. A neutral space is desirable, depending on the level of controversy associated with the session.

How are they organized?

As an early step, an agency defines the issues to be presented. This process guides the choices and preparation of audio-visual materials (whatever graphics tell the story best). The process also guides the selection of written materials to be distributed.

Based on the issues, an agency designates an event coordinator. For example, the coordinator may be from the planning disciplines if the subject is long-range planning, or from the engineering disciplines if a project is to be announced or explored.

The agency coordinator sets a date and time for the event. Both date and time should be convenient for people who are employed during the day. The Regional Transit District in Sacramento, California, held evening and Saturday open houses to review alternatives for an extension of existing light rail into South Sacramento. In experimenting with alternative times for open forum hearings, the Georgia DOT determined that 4:00 to 7:00 P.M. met most community needs. The Michigan DOT has found that 3:30 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. and 7:00 P.M. to 8:30 P.M. work best, in part because rural communities often "respect" the dinner hour. Longer hours are essential for controversial or large-scale projects when many people want to participate. Alternatively, multiple sessions may be held at various times.

The coordinator finds space large enough to accommodate not only tables and displays but also traffic flow for people to move efficiently and comfortably between areas. At hearings, space should include a location for taking oral testimony, and the facility should be relatively quiet, comfortable, easy to find, free

of conflicting events, and handicapped accessible. Places to sit and rest should be provided. Drinking water is essential.

Multiple locations are desirable for large geographical areas and for planning processes. To encourage people to attend meetings for its Statewide Transportation Improvement Program, the Oregon DOT held open house meetings in school cafeterias, libraries, senior centers, and a community theater. (See [Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events](#).)

An agency gets the word out about the event. A media strategy helps an agency determine content and spacing of announcements. Media announcements dramatically enhance public awareness. Handouts are distributed in areas of potentially high interest. (See [Media Strategies](#).)

The agency prepares illustrative materials for display. Presentation boards, copies of documents, maps, and videos are very helpful. (See [Public Information Materials; Video Techniques](#).) Topics to be illustrated can include traffic, noise, specific sites, economics, design, neighborhood impacts, routes, goals, evaluation criteria, and policy issues. Fact sheets or maps can be provided for visitors to take home. The South Carolina DOT uses color coding on graphics intended for community review to emphasize and highlight the projected impacts of a project.

Tables are provided for specific purposes that allow people to address issues in depth. Each table should be clearly identified. During the feasibility study for the Los Angeles–Bakersfield High Speed Ground Transportation Project, tables were provided for the following: sign-in; orientation and video; routes and stations; environmental study; engineering; train technology; costs; statewide policy; and terminal station location.

The agency staffs the event. Staff people with specific areas of expertise are scheduled for each table. Reception staff people are essential to welcome new arrivals and to let them know how the open house works. The Georgia DOT uses a “greeter”—a staffer who welcomes participants and helps them understand the process. Other staff members can aid in recording comments or in explaining issues to people. South Carolina DOT personnel wear name tags to identify themselves and encourage questions from participants.

A method for recording comments from the community is established. At open house sessions, an agency can provide cards for people to fill out, for either immediate or mail-back return. For mail-backs, pre-paid postage on the card or envelope speeds response.

For open forum hearings, an agency must provide a formal means of recording comments. The Georgia DOT uses a court reporter to record comments, while the South Carolina DOT provides a staff person to tape record them.

Long lines at stenographer or tape recording stations detract from the informality and convenience of this format for the public. Agencies may provide multiple stenographers or recording stations. The Georgia DOT used two stenographers for an open forum hearing attended by about 1,500 people. Another strategy is to use speaker time limits. At an open house on its statewide plan, the New York State DOT used a traffic signal as a device to let speakers know when their speaking time had expired. The Delaware DOT schedules its speakers in order of sign-up and adheres to a specified time limit. In other locations, however, time limits would be unacceptable. Agency staff in Michigan successfully rely on the rest of the audience to encourage brevity. Knowing when time limits are essential or appropriate requires a thorough knowledge of the community involved.

How are they used with other techniques?

Open houses can be combined with public meetings. Displays, brochures, documents, videos, and other materials can introduce a meeting and help people prepare for it. (See [Public Meetings/Hearings](#).)

Open houses can be partly staffed with civic advisory committee members. For the New Haven, Connecticut, Q Bridge Study, committee members staffed open houses to help ConnDOT respond to questions about the study and the alternatives being considered. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).)

Open houses often incorporate brainstorming or focus groups. The Delaware DOT allowed participants to write comments directly on maps. Other people could then review the comments and add their opinions. North Carolina's Triangle Transit Authority conducted mini-focus groups as part of open houses on long-range transit options for the region. (See [Brainstorming; Focus Groups](#).)

Public information is essential, including press releases, briefings, speakers' bureaus, brochures, posters, mailings, and media announcements. All information must be timely to assure that public hearing notice requirements are met and to give people time to fit the event into their schedules. Reminders can be sent out a few days before the session. (See [Public Information Materials; Media Strategies](#).)

Mailing lists are used to contact potentially interested people. An agency should make special efforts to solicit minority and ethnic participation and attendance at the session. (See [Mailing Lists](#).)

An open house is a convenient place to conduct an informal survey. People can complete the survey right away or mail it back. In this fashion, an agency obtains responses quickly and analyzes the results to ascertain community interest and understanding. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) The Nevada DOT conducted a survey of interested parties in conjunction with an open forum hearing. As part of work on its long-range plan, New Jersey DOT recruited random participants for focus groups during open houses conducted at a shopping mall.

What are the drawbacks?

An open forum hearing without an audience session precludes debate on a proposal's merits. Parties do not hear opposing views first-hand—nor do they have an opportunity to clarify stances or raise questions about opposing viewpoints. Some critics charge that agencies use open forum hearings as a “divide-and-conquer” strategy. If differing views are not heard, the public may be surprised to find a controversy exists. When people hear one another, they develop an improved understanding of a proposal and its implications for other people. To assure that multiple viewpoints are presented at an open forum hearing, the Ohio DOT allows community groups to set up exhibition tables near the open meeting tables, labeled clearly to distinguish them from agency tables.

An open house/open forum hearing only reaches people willing to attend. Potential stakeholders who do not attend may not receive essential information, and their opinions are not heard. Translators, translations of summaries, and blue dots on name tags of bilingual staff, were used to supplement the Orange County, California, open house, because minority participants said they were ill at ease at such events. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).)

Outreach is limited to a few days, even if hearings are held in different locations. A single event should not be the sole opportunity for people to be heard. It does not reach large numbers on a continuing basis—a key factor in successful public involvement.

Informal conversation does not replace written comment. In brief conversations with agency officials during an open house, people sometimes get lulled into a sense of being heard and fully understood. Agency staff cannot be expected to retain all opinions and may not have sufficient time to note each statement. Unless official recording is underway, people should be encouraged to present written comments, so their opinions or viewpoints are sure to be heard.

Constituents do not hear elected officials at an open forum hearing. At traditional public hearings, elected leaders announce their views. At open forum hearings, however, officials can speak to only a few people at a time.

Effective displays and materials may be expensive. Large-scale graphics and photographs are essential to promote rapid comprehension and understanding of a proposal. Video is often used as a method of explaining both the proposal and the process of public review. (See [Video Techniques](#).)

When are they most effective?

An open house effectively disseminates information, either at an early stage or prior to decision-making. Input to decisions or plans is also collected. Additional events update information and obtain further public input. The Montana DOT uses an open house or walk-in session to disseminate information, frequently in tandem with a traditional hearing.

An open forum hearing is useful at the location or design stage for gathering information. The Montana DOT uses it when it is essential to register opinions from many subgroups.

For further information:

- Connecticut Department of Transportation, (860) 594-2000
- Georgia Department of Transportation, (404) 699-4406
- Montana Department of Transportation, (406) 444-7205
- Nebraska Department of Transportation, (402) 479-4871
- Nevada Department of Transportation, (702) 687-3463
- New Mexico Department of Transportation, (505) 827-3228
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, (717) 772-2563
- South Carolina Department of Transportation, (803) 737-1350
- Tennessee Department of Transportation, (615) 741-2221

CONFERENCES, WORKSHOPS, AND RETREATS

What are conferences, workshops, and retreats?

Conferences, workshops, and retreats are special meetings to inform people and solicit input on specific policy issues, plans, or projects. In size and importance, they range from a subset of a larger meeting to a large multi-day event.

A conference is a highly-structured program of presentations and discussions. Conferences usually have an overall theme, with multiple related sessions throughout the day. They can have presentations or panel discussions followed by questions. Top officials or panels of recognized experts help boost interest in attendance. Conferences often have plenary sessions attended by all participants, followed by breakout sessions on various elements. Conferences are as short as half a day or as long as three days. The Kansas and Pennsylvania DOTs held all-day conferences on their long-range statewide transportation plans. Workshops dealt with specific issues of the plans.

A workshop is a task-oriented meeting organized around a particular topic or activity. Typically, it involves a relatively small group (20–40) and addresses aspects of a narrowly-defined topic. Workshops are usually one to three hours in duration for small groups to work on specific agenda. Because they are relatively short and task-focused, workshops can be part of a larger meeting, conference, or retreat. The Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission includes workshops at the beginning of every meeting to provide information and discussion on specific topics to be handled later in the meeting.

Retreats are workshops held in non-traditional settings without distractions. A retreat is especially useful to work on personal conflict resolution and communication. Participants give their undivided attention to specific issues without interruptions for phone calls or everyday distractions. Like workshops, retreats are typically task-oriented and work on focused topics. Because of the complexity of an issue or topic, a retreat may require one full day and sometimes longer.

Conferences, workshops, and retreats have several common characteristics. They:

- Are special events, publicized separately from other events;
- Highlight specific aspects of issues;
- Are applied in either planning or project development;
- Set the stage for plans or projects;
- Showcase and refine specific aspects of plans or projects;
- Provide focus and direction to participants; and
- Often require advance registration or are invitational.

Why are they useful?

Conferences, workshops, and retreats are useful at any stage of a process. As special meetings, they are used early to set the stage for formulating plans or projects. They are used mid-process to showcase and refine specific aspects of plans or projects, resolve conflicts, and work toward consensus. Near the end of a process, they demonstrate findings and conclusions of the work effort. The Albany, New York, MPO scheduled conferences at the beginning, mid-point, and end of development of its long-range plan.

Special meetings allow people to better understand a project or plan. They help individuals see the viewpoint of others. They give a “snapshot” of community concerns and reactions to proposals. The Portland, Oregon, Metro conducted mode and alignment workshops that generated good ideas from community residents. Participants worked on maps to illustrate their concerns and place proposed alignment options.

Special meetings offer a way to zero in on specific issues and concerns. They deal with a single topic and its ramifications, or focus on notable impacts of concern to individuals or groups. They provide an opportunity for detailed discussion on a wide variety of elements of a plan or a project. The Massachusetts Highway Department sponsored a series of conferences on the future of Route 128, Boston's beltway. One metropolitan-level conference included presentations by experts from around the country, while the other two focused on State and local concerns.

Do they have special uses?

A conference helps “kick off” a planning process or project development. Agency or elected officials add credibility to a process by being on the program to discuss their hopes for the project.

A conference provides a forum to discuss statutes and regulations. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) held a public conference called “The Right Route: Pollution Prevention and Transportation Planning in New England.” National leaders from EPA and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) first addressed plenary sessions dealing with the implications of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA,) the Energy Policy Act, and the Clean Air Act. Workshops were scheduled for late morning and afternoon to deal with issues and develop a list of potential outcomes to be reviewed by a panel of regional policy leaders at the closing plenary session.

Conferences are used to celebrate the successful completion of a process. Local residents and agency staff come together to review and evaluate a process and its product. Local officials and participants may officially bring closure to a successful process. Celebratory events reinforce the value of an inclusive planning process and give agencies an informal way to thank community members for their time and effort.

Workshops are particularly useful for smaller groups of people who want to participate intensively. A small number of participants gives each a way of being heard and registering thoughts and opinions. Small groups allow a greater appreciation of others' views through opportunities for more extensive interaction. Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, used workshops to ascertain local concerns and demonstrate how the concerns might be met, largely through urban design solutions.

Workshops and retreats are inherently participatory and encourage a “working together” atmosphere. The informality encourages discussion and give-and-take. By focusing on narrow topics, workshops allow time for every participant to express a viewpoint. They are easily integrated into a larger participatory process. The North Dakota Consensus Council, a public-private partnership, sponsors forums on issues ranging from education to local government services. Facilitators elicit diverse views, using consensus-building techniques to resolve conflicts and find common ground. (See [Facilitation](#).)

Workshops and retreats make it easier to participate without “going on the record.” Typically, participants can speak out without being quoted at a later time. Questions are asked to glean information. Participants raise and discuss points without formal attribution, and the “trial balloons” that are a positive feature of negotiation are floated. The Rochester, New York, Telephone Corporation held workshops to solicit concerns and views about potential deregulation of the telecommunications industry in that city.

Retreats are used to develop details of a transportation program. The Georgia DOT held a two-day retreat with 40 representatives of transportation users, operators, customers, and groups to “tell us what the public involvement process should be.” The University of Georgia's Institute of Community and Area Development was retained to organize, conduct, and facilitate the meeting, resulting in short-term recommendations that have been implemented by the Georgia DOT.

Retreats can “clear the air” on contentious issues, bringing disputants together to hear all sides of an issue and work out differences. They can work on thorny problems and look for elements of agreement. With a neutral facilitator, retreats provide an off-the-record means of stating and working on issues between opponents. The process of addressing difficult issues helps loosen adversarial relationships and creates the possibility for compromise and consensus.

Who participates? And how?

Special meetings target specific stakeholders for presentations and discussions. Conferences, workshops, and retreats help deal with specific local concerns. They help garner suggestions and support by explaining a proposal thoroughly. The State of Washington’s Western Area Power Administration used workshops to develop and select strategies of its plan for future power needs using customer preference exercises.

Conferences, workshops, and retreats can be tailored to subsets of groups or constituencies who do not normally participate. The level of impact on specific portions of a community may warrant establishing specific meetings for them. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).) Over time, it may be appropriate to add workshop sessions to incorporate local concerns into planning or project development. Costa Mesa, California, organizations sponsored “living room dialogues” among small groups to air feelings and issues about day laborers gathering in a park and shopping center while waiting to be hired. Discussions resulted in establishment of a hiring center for day workers and a new human rights commission.

Conferences are customarily open to the public. Workshop and retreat participants come from the entire community or by invitation. Special efforts are needed to assure that all potential stakeholders are aware of the event. Invitations can be extended to business leaders and active members of civic clubs or organizations, along with agencies and interest groups. Inviting elected officials to special meetings is always appropriate. Certain conferences are attended by invitation only. The Minnesota Metropolitan Council invited key players in business, government, and education to a conference on regional economic strategies as part of a plan to build council identity.

Knowledgeable people should be part of each special meeting. For conferences, experts in specific fields serve as speakers or presenters of information. For workshops and retreats, resource people are essential for providing information and answering questions. Agency people ordinarily act as individuals in the meetings, unless specialized questions are asked. For breakout sessions, workshops, and retreats, a trained facilitator acts in the neutral, central role of leading the meeting and keeping it on course.

Workshops and retreats can target specific groups. The Edison Electric Institute held a two-day retreat to improve communication between industry and consumer groups. A group of 20 to 24 people were invited, chosen by their demonstrated ability to effectively present a position for their groups. Time was allowed for socialization to encourage personal relationships and dialogue among the participants.

During a special meeting, participants ask questions and add their points of view to the discussion. They challenge agency reasoning on projects or plans. They discuss alternative uses of resources.

Agencies hold meetings in local areas convenient for participants. Planning for the Central Valley water project in California included public workshops at disparate locations held every four or five months over a three-year period. The project involved four rounds of meetings throughout the valley.

Participants need preparatory information prior to a meeting. An agency sends information to potential participants in advance to let them choose whether or not to attend a special meeting. (See [Mailing Lists](#).) A conference agenda or brochure displays topics, speakers, and opportunities for participation in discussion. A telephone number or agency contact helps participants find further information.

How do agencies use conferences, workshops, and retreats?

Special meetings send a message of agency commitment to public involvement and enhance agency credibility in a process of planning or project development. A conference held in Atlanta, Georgia, helped define new interagency approaches to fostering public participation of people affected by transportation investments. The conference was jointly sponsored by the Federal Highway, Transit, and Rail Administrations and the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University.

They give plans and projects a high profile and attract interest. By focusing events and presentations on a single proposal, an agency attracts many participants, including the media, to an event where they can be guided toward presentations or discussions that interest them.

Conferences give in-depth information about a project or plan. The complexity of a planning effort or project development can be portrayed at a conference where detailed information can be obtained. A conference includes sub-meetings and presentations on a variety of topics. A conference program has several topics presented at the same hour in separate rooms, allowing participants to choose among them.

Special meetings provide input to a plan or project. Agencies obtain new ideas in response to their proposals. Participants have an opportunity to offer suggestions for policy changes or for alterations in details of a project. Special meetings provide an opportunity for participants to debate the issues with one another.

Who leads them?

A conference may require specialized organization and leadership. The scope of a conference, involving many presentations and break-out sessions, may be challenging for existing staff to manage. An agency conference manager may be needed. Consultant staff may be required to manage the event.

A conference can be co-sponsored by more than one agency, thus broadening the range of concerns and attracting new participants. The Missouri Highway and Transportation Department has had successes with co-sponsored conferences.

Conferences with few speakers may be managed by a small staff. Organizing date, place, time, and speakers is manageable if the event is uncomplicated.

A workshop is led by an agency staffer or community volunteer, if the size of the group is manageable. A large workshop requires special skills to moderate the event and keep it on target. An agency project manager may attend a workshop but usually should not lead the session if issues are highly controversial, since that may compromise the objectivity of the process. Workshops may be led by citizens themselves. The Puget Sound Regional Transit Project has financially supported citizen-initiated workshops. This alleviates the issue of government control and promotes community leadership.

Retreats require a neutral moderator. Agency staff members may be able to lead the session but are seen as biased if they are involved in the process or project. A neutral moderator should remain unbiased in soliciting ideas and comments from all participants and should direct the proceedings toward the goals of the retreat. (See [Facilitation](#).)

What are the costs?

Initial costs include renting meeting space and breakout rooms, if necessary. Conferences require staff for entrance and registration areas and preparation of individual rooms for specific presentations. They include arranging for speakers or presentations, including costs for hotels and food if out-of-town

speakers are used. Costs frequently include refreshments for participants. For a full-day conference, it is wise to arrange for lunch for the speakers and the participants.

A few conference costs are offset by registration fees. The fee ordinarily covers only the costs of printing and refreshments. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, a community organization, charged \$15 for a conference to inform people about transportation issues, the importance of public involvement, and new opportunities for involvement. The conference included skills workshops dealing with gaining media exposure, influencing decision-makers, and building a coalition. The Albany, New York, MPO charged small fees to cover meals for its conferences but provided scholarships for low-income participants.

Workshops are less costly than conferences. A workshop usually requires only a room and a staff person to manage materials, welcome participants, and document the process. Fees for a workshop or retreat are usually not appropriate, because they can discourage people from attending.

A retreat requires a room and a facilitator. The facilitator must be neutral and not a proponent of an agency's agenda. Like a workshop, a retreat requires only a room and a staff person to serve the needs of both the facilitator and the participants. (See [Facilitation](#).)

Finding rooms in publicly-owned sites helps keep costs down. Colleges or universities provide good locations for conferences, workshops, or retreats. These sites are usually neutral locations where participants feel welcome.

Supplementary funding sources may be available. The Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, MPO received financial support from a local foundation to pay for all costs of a weekend retreat for a blue-ribbon panel reviewing the long-range plan.

How are they organized?

All special meetings are coordinated with the community, which provides input on what issues to cover and who from the community should be involved. Publicity is funneled through neighborhood channels. The community may suggest a place and date for the special meeting. (See [Key Person Interviews](#); [Civic Advisory Committees](#); [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

Conferences require a rigid structure and agenda for speakers, presentations, and break-out groups. Preparation for a conference requires a good deal of staff work to organize the content and publicize the event to the community.

Agency staff organize a conference, if resources are available. Agencies should be aware that the resources are significant. Specialized consultants may be necessary as conference assistants.

Workshops and retreats have a flexible structure. They can be organized more casually than a conference and are flexible in selection of date, place, and format. However, they require leadership to assure that they accomplish the assigned task or goal. Both workshops and retreats need an agenda, noting the time available for discussion of agenda elements, and information on what the agency intends to do with the information from the meeting.

How are they used with other techniques?

Brainstorming is an integral element of conferences, workshops, or retreats and a useful way to quickly involve many participants in the process. (See [Brainstorming](#).)

Visioning is advanced by workshops and retreats. A special meeting can focus on establishing a vision for the future. With an allotted time period to explore varied aspects, the special meeting is well-

adapted to this use. Oregon DOT used workshops on issues and visions at six locations along the Pacific Coast in developing a draft master plan. (See [Visioning](#).)

Facilitation is an important element of special meetings, especially workshops and retreats. Participants need a facilitator's guidance on timing, focus, and reporting the events of a workshop or retreat. (See [Facilitation](#).)

Small group techniques are used in workshops to open a meeting and gain participants' interest. They can then be used to set goals for the meeting and to guide the process. (See [Small Group Techniques](#).)

Special meetings supplement regular meetings. Conferences, workshops, and retreats are high points of an overall program of public participation and cannot by themselves constitute a public participation program.

Are they flexible?

Workshops are used in a variety of ways—as a break-out of a conference or retreat or as special events on their own, to involve people in discussions and resolution of thorny issues. In Washington State, Seattle's Puget Sound Regional Council offered a series of community workshops at several points throughout its planning processes.

Conferences and retreats can include workshops on the agenda. Large special meetings can have break-out sessions for concurrent workshops focusing on specific issues.

Special meetings are held on any appropriate days and at convenient times. The timing of a special meeting is largely up to an agency, guided by community needs or requests.

The level of effort for a special meeting is flexible. A special meeting can be devised to meet community needs within the resources available to an agency. Conferences require the greatest output of resources, while workshops may expend few agency resources.

What are the drawbacks?

Special meetings require substantial publicity. Agencies need to be prepared to expend resources to make the community aware of the meetings.

All special meetings require extensive preparation by staff. Resources can be quickly expended during the preparation period.

Conferences are often expensive and may be viewed as exclusionary. Arrangements for space and speakers can be significant. Publicity must be extensive to attract media and community attention.

A retreat requires a skilled facilitator.

A workshop is ineffective if leadership is unable to keep it on track. It is not automatically a positive event, unless effort is expended to assure that staff or experienced personnel are present to guide its progress.

For further information:

- Chesapeake Bay Foundation, (301) 261-2350
- Environmental Justice Resource Center, Clark Atlanta University, (404) 880-8000
- Kansas Department of Transportation, (913) 296-2252
- Minnesota Metropolitan Council (Minneapolis/St. Paul), (612) 291-6423
- North Dakota Consensus Council, (701) 328-2000
- Rochester Telephone Company, (716) 777-1000
- University of Georgia Institute of Community and Area Development, (706) 542-3350

Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS

B. SELECTING AN ORGANIZING FEATURE FOR A MEETING

Nearly every meeting focuses on discussion, whether people are giving opinions, debating issues among themselves, or challenging an agency by questioning fundamental assumptions. Meetings can be exploratory (for instance, “design-ins” where participants draw on maps to illustrate community values or activity patterns) or consensus-building (including collaborative problem-solving).

Specific techniques for organizing meetings are useful in helping people think about and discuss issues, how they are personally affected, and how proposed solutions impact community life. They help make meetings more creative, stimulating, and engaging. Appropriate, well-organized meetings also enlighten people about an agency approach and its openness to community involvement.

Traditionally, meetings often begin with a presentation by one or several speakers, a slide show, or a simple video, followed by discussion. Some meetings focus on developing solutions to pending problems or suggesting alternatives to existing situations, and their productivity may be enhanced by the use of non-traditional meeting structures.

Organizing features, as described below, are tailored to participants’ needs and interests, as well as to the specific goals of a meeting:

- Brainstorming;
- Charrettes;
- Visioning; and
- Small group techniques.

While the choice of meeting types and frequency lies principally with an agency, it often helps to work with participants or community leaders to determine the best times and formats. People feel more involved if asked for advice and if meetings fit their needs and their styles of communication.

BRAINSTORMING

What is brainstorming?

Participants “brainstorm” when they come together in a freethinking forum to generate ideas. As now used, brainstorming is no longer an unstructured method of eliciting ideas from a group. Used properly—either alone or in conjunction with other techniques—brainstorming can be a highly effective method of moving participants out of conflict and toward consensus. For example, the Cape Cod Commission in Massachusetts used brainstorming to develop goals and objectives to guide transportation planning.

Brainstorming has these basic components:

- Generating as many solutions to a problem as possible;
- Listing every idea presented *without* comment or evaluation;
- Grouping and evaluating ideas to reach consensus; and
- Prioritizing ideas.

Experience suggests that each task can be further subdivided to improve understanding of the overall process and its results. For example, ideas may need clarification for the group to grasp and evaluate, or the role of brainstorming in issue resolution may need to be explained. As a basic means of involving people, it has few peers if carried out successfully.

Why is it useful?

Brainstorming brings new ideas to bear on a problem. The freethinking atmosphere encourages fresh approaches. Creativity is enhanced, because individuals are encouraged to bring up *all* ideas—even those that might appear outrageous. Even imperfectly developed thoughts may jog the thinking of other participants. In Atlanta, Georgia, a brainstorming effort produced future options in the Vision 2020 process.

Problems are defined better as questions arise. Alternatives appear in a new or different perspective. Novel approaches to an issue can arise during the process. Brainstorming gives participants a sense of progress and accomplishment and helps them move onto more difficult tasks.

Brainstorming helps reduce conflict. It helps participants see other points of view and possibly change their perspective on problems. It may not be useful in resolving deeply felt conflicts but can help set the stage for a different technique if an impasse has been reached. Civility is required of each participant. (See [Negotiation and Mediation](#).)

Brainstorming is democratic. All participants have equal status and an equal opportunity to participate. No one person’s ideas dominate a brainstorming session. Brainstorming heightens the awareness of community and sensitizes individuals to the behavior of the group and its participants. It helps mold participants into a working group.

Does brainstorming have special uses?

Brainstorming demonstrates an agency’s openness to new ideas and its commitment to working with community participants. It leads to further study of unexplored ideas. It helps find common ground for consensus about a solution. Brainstorming has been used by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) in exploring multi-modal alternatives in an interstate bridge reconstruction project in New Haven.

Brainstorming is easily understood and implemented. No special training is required for participants to express their ideas. All sides expect open and frank exposition of points of view. Argumentative behavior is discouraged and creativity appreciated.

Who participates? And how?

Anyone can participate in a brainstorming session. It is useful to encourage participants from diverse backgrounds and interests in the issue to be discussed. Providing background information to participants bolsters the ability of each to contribute. Information should be distributed in advance of the session, if possible. Large groups can be divided into smaller subsets to promote full participation. (See [Small Group Techniques](#); [Public Information Materials](#).)

People participate by bringing their ideas to the table, working in groups of 6 to 10. All ideas are duly noted and recorded to reassure participants that their comments are being adequately considered. Participants can record ideas on newsprint or butcher paper, or the agency can supply staff to record their ideas. People can prioritize their ideas by using strips of colored adhesive dots (found in office supply stores). About seven dots per person works well. Working individually, participants use dots to indicate their preferences. The dots can be divided among several good ideas or concentrated on one idea that is very important. The sheets of paper with dots are an effective display of the prioritization and help identify the group's top priorities. Participation is furthered when notes of the meeting and subsequent events can be distributed to the participants.

How do agencies use the output?

Through brainstorming, agencies become aware of issues, problems, and detailed solutions that might not otherwise come to light. New ideas assist agencies in crafting compromise positions and in setting priorities by using input provided directly by stakeholders. Shelburne, Vermont, and Flathead County, Montana, used brainstorming sessions to clarify and prioritize issues for new area plans.

Who leads a brainstorming session?

Brainstorming needs a facilitator or moderator, who may be found within the group itself, agency staff, or an outside firm. Facilitators must be sensitive to group dynamics and be able to draw statements and positions from participants in an affable way. They must assure that all participants are heard and that civility is maintained. An agency staff person may be needed to assist groups that have difficulties with the process. (See [Facilitation](#).)

What are the costs?

Brainstorming is inexpensive. The group leader can be an individual on an existing staff, but a person experienced in facilitating the technique is preferable. Depending on the issue to be discussed or the degree of anticipated conflict, an outside consultant may be a desirable addition.

Material needs are minimal. A quiet room is essential. Materials should be on hand to provide necessary data and background information. Although this information need not be overly detailed, questions are certain to arise, and it is preferable to be able to respond appropriately. Potential materials include:

- Large newsprint or butcher paper, with markers to record ideas;
- Boards to display applicable data;
- Large, easily visible maps;
- Overlays to allow sketching on maps; and
- Adhesive dots for prioritization.

How is brainstorming organized?

Careful management facilitates a brainstorming session best. Agency staff people organize and implement a brainstorming session. Staff needs are minimal but may include a facilitator and probably an assistant for physical management of charts and recording of ideas. Resource people should be present for responses to questions.

Initial efforts include planning the brainstorming session—defining the precise issue to be addressed, identifying potential participants, deciding on the process and schedule to be followed, and determining anticipated outcomes of the session so that players will know the scope and stakes involved. It is also important to detail for participants how the agency expects to use the results.

Effective brainstorming sessions are small (6 to 10 people). If the group is too small, participants are not stimulated to generate ideas; if it is too large, the more vocal few may dominate the meeting. At large meetings, participants are divided into groups. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) held five subregional sessions at key milestones. Roundtables of 8 to 10 people at each event used brainstorming to generate regional plans that fit within given financial scenarios for future transit options.

A brainstorming session usually has a simple agenda:

- Introductions with brief outlines of participants' backgrounds;
- Discussion of the brainstorming process and how it fits into the overall process;
- Generation of ideas, listed without evaluation or criticism;
- Clarifying and explaining ideas, as required;
- Review, grouping, and elimination of redundant ideas;
- Prioritization; and
- Presentation of each group's results by the moderator to the larger group.

How is it used with other techniques?

Brainstorming is always a stage of a larger process. It is frequently used when an agency is starting a lengthy or complex undertaking with a separate element for public involvement. It can be part of a focus group—to open discussion and introduce participants; it can be part of a charrette—to establish the points of view of participants; it can be used in civic advisory committees—to establish a consensus on a project; and it can be used in public meetings. (See [Focus Groups; Charrettes; Civic Advisory Committees; Public Meetings/Hearings](#).) Brainstorming was used in conjunction with public opinion surveys to design a public involvement program for the Albany, New York, area. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) In Pennsylvania, community members used brainstorming to select representatives for a civic advisory committee.

What are the drawbacks?

Facilitation can pose unique challenges. A single questioner can disrupt proceedings by continuously raising questions and suspicions about the motivations of participants or sponsors. Unassertive participants may be neglected without active solicitation of their participation. Opponents may refuse to consider each other's ideas.

Unspoken attitudes may affect results. Individual participants who feel diverted from more apparently purposeful tasks become impatient if they feel the process is a waste of time. It is essential to focus brainstorming on issues that make sense to the participants and to clearly explain how the results will be used. People who feel they are being controlled or patronized often withdraw from full participation. Agency staff members who feel that the process is leading nowhere may not respond appropriately to questions from participants.

For further information:

- Atlanta Regional Commission (Vision 2020), Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2500
- Cape Cod Commission (Cape Cod Regional Plan), (508) 362-3828
- Capital District Transportation Committee, Albany, New York (public involvement program), (518) 458-2161
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, (206) 684-1357
- Connecticut Department of Transportation, Environmental Planning Bureau (Q Bridge Study), (860) 594-2939
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, Bureau of Environmental Quality, (717) 783-4580

CHARRETTES

What is a charrette?

A charrette is a meeting to resolve a problem or issue. Within a specified time limit, participants work together intensely to reach a resolution. The sponsoring agency usually sets the goals and time limit and announces them ahead of time. A leader's responsibility is to bring out all points of view from concerned local residents as well as agency representatives and experts.

Here are the usual components of a charrette:

- Definition of issues to be resolved;
- Analysis of the problem and alternative approaches to solutions;
- Assignment of small groups to clarify issues;
- Use of staff people to find supporting data;
- Development of proposals to respond to issues;
- Development of alternative solutions;
- Presentation and analysis of final proposal(s); and
- Consensus and final resolution of the approach to be taken.

Why is it useful?

A charrette is problem-oriented. The breadth of background of participants assures full discussion of issues, interrelationships, and impacts. Its time limits challenge people to rapidly, openly, and honestly examine the problem and help potential adversaries reach consensus on an appropriate solution. (See [Negotiation & Mediation](#).) For example, charrettes were used to formulate alternatives to a controversial highway project in Knoxville, Tennessee, and a downtown plan for Jacksonville, Florida, by guiding business and civic leaders and neighborhood people to a recommended solution.

A charrette produces visible results. It is often used early in a planning process to provide useful ideas and perspectives from concerned interest groups. In mid-process, a charrette helps resolve sticky issues. Late in the process, it is useful to resolve an impasse between groups.

A charrette enlarges the degree of public involvement in transportation, reducing feelings of alienation from government. It offers people interaction with public agencies and allows questions to be asked before decisions are made. It supplements, but does not replace, other kinds of public involvement.

Does a charrette have special uses?

A charrette calls attention to an issue. It can dramatize:

- The need for public attention to resolve an issue;
- A deliberately participatory problem-solving process;
- A public agency's openness to suggestions;
- A search for all possible approaches to a question; and
- A democratically-derived consensus.

Charrettes generate alternative solutions to problems. The setting encourages openness and creativity. All suggestions from the group—however outrageous—should be examined to encourage thinking about better approaches. (See [Brainstorming](#).) In New Hampshire's Community Stewardship Program, for instance, volunteer experts are invited by towns to help assess strengths and weaknesses of town planning.

Who participates? And how?

Anyone can participate in a charrette. A wide range of people with differing interests should attend. Traditional participants represent organized groups, but individuals with any stake in the issue should be encouraged to attend. (See [Minority, Ethnic, and Low-income Groups](#).)

How people participate depends on the charrette leader. An experienced leader assures that a range of views is heard. The leader invites people to take a stance and present their points of view. All participants are assured an opportunity to speak out, and the leader encourages even the most reticent participant to speak up without fear of rebuke or ridicule. The open, free-wheeling charrette format encourages enthusiasm and responses.

How do agencies use the output?

A charrette sharpens agency understanding of the perspectives of interest groups. Early in project formulation, a charrette offers a glimpse of potentially competing demands and can be a barometer of the potential for consensus. Thus it helps generate alternatives and identify issues. In Minnesota and Alabama, for example, State agencies respond to the needs of individual towns by providing experts for weekend charrettes.

Who leads a charrette?

A leader experienced in charrette techniques is a must. To avoid chaos in a charrette, a high level of discipline is required. The charrette leader should be familiar with group dynamics and the substantive issues the group faces. The leader tailors the setting, background materials, and issues to the goal of the charrette and elicits participation from all group members within the allotted time. One or two staff people should be available for support to the leader and to supply data and information.

A steering committee usually makes arrangements for a charrette. It may be composed of representatives of Federal and State transportation or other agencies, consultants, affected municipalities, and community groups. The steering committee should agree upon a leader for a charrette.

What are the costs?

A charrette involves significant resources. The chief items are sufficient space and background materials and an experienced leader. Graphics must be used so that participants quickly comprehend the problem and envision alternative solutions. Background materials must be available at the start of the charrette so that no time is lost in investigating the problem. Preparatory work leading to a charrette is intensive, whether done in-house or by an outside specialist.

Staffing should include:

- A leader experienced in the charrette technique;
- Staffers who understand the derivation and use of the data;
- Staffers who have worked on the problem; and
- Staffers who have worked with applicable policy.

Materials can include:

- Large maps;
- Overlays to allow sketching on maps;

- Boards to display applicable data;
- Large newsprint pads and markers to record ideas;
- Photographs of sites;
- Handouts of basic goals/time limits/meeting ground rules; and
- Printed background information with background data.

How is a charrette organized?

Organization depends on the issue's complexity and the intended length of the event. This work includes:

- Obtaining agreement on the process;
- Obtaining agreement on timing;
- Determining potential participants;
- Finding an experienced charrette leader;
- Managing special funding, if required;
- Seeking out resource people;
- Sending out invitations and background material well in advance;
- Finding an appropriate space for meeting;
- Handling required publicity;
- Setting up space to encourage informal discussion; and
- Portraying issues clearly in both verbal and graphic form.

Is a charrette flexible?

A minimum of four hours is essential for a charrette focused on a modest problem. While the average ranges from one to several days, some agencies hold one- and two-week charrettes or organize them as multiple sessions over a period of time.

A charrette occurs at any time in a planning process, but preparation is crucial. Advance work can take a month or more, depending on the issue to be discussed. Charrette materials are flexible and should be tailored to the focus of the meeting.

How is it used with other techniques?

A charrette combines effectively with other techniques. When matched with a civic advisory committee, it focuses on solving a specific problem. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) Paired with the visioning process, it is an attractive means of eliciting ideas. (See [Visioning](#).) A charrette also focuses on a single issue raised during a brainstorming session. (See [Brainstorming](#).) In Portland, Maine, a two-day charrette on the long-range plan followed a transportation fair. (See [Transportation Fairs](#).)

What are the drawbacks?

Because it focuses on a specific problem to be resolved or issue to be addressed, a charrette is usually a one-time event. Thus, the invitation list and timing must be thoroughly considered and discussed to maximize interaction through broad-based participation. Goals must be made clear so the expectations do not exceed possible results. The depth of analysis from a single short session can be disappointing. Follow-up work must be carefully considered both before and during a charrette.

When is a charrette most effective?

A charrette can resolve an impasse. During such a use, neutral participants should be involved to bring fresh ideas for consideration. When a problem is immediate, a charrette is effective because people are vitally interested in the outcome. For maximum effect, a charrette should have the approval of elected officials, agency heads, and community groups. A charrette is also useful:

- Early in the project;
- Following a brainstorming session;
- When focus on a single issue is required; and
- When a range of potential solutions is needed.

For further information:

- American Institute of Architects' Regional/Urban Assistance Team (R/UDAT), (202) 626-7358
- American Society of Landscape Architects, Community Assistance Team, (202) 686-2752
- Minnesota Design Team, Minnesota Department of Trade & Economic Development, (612) 297-1291
- New Hampshire Community Stewardship Program, (603) 271-2155
- Portland, Maine, Area Comprehensive Transportation Committee, (207) 724-9891
- Urban Land Institute's Panel Advisory Service, (202) 624-7133

VISIONING

What is visioning?

Visioning leads to a goals statement. Typically, it consists of a series of meetings focused on long-range issues. Visioning results in a long-range plan. With a 20- or 30-year horizon, visioning also sets a strategy for achieving the goals. Visioning has been used to set a long-range statewide transportation plan in Ohio, a statewide comprehensive plan in New Jersey, and a regional land-use and transportation plan in the Seattle, Washington, region. The Governor of Georgia, acting as “Chief Planner,” used it to create long-range goals for the State. Central Oklahoma 2020 is a visioning project for a regional plan.

Priorities and performance standards can be part of visioning. Priorities are set to distinguish essential goals. Performance standards allow an evaluation of progress toward goals over time. In Jacksonville, Florida, a community report card is used to determine priorities; each target for the future is evaluated annually. In Minnesota a statewide report card was used to evaluate the current status and set up goals and milestones for the future. Oregon established benchmarks to measure progress toward its long-term goals.

Why is it useful?

Visioning offers the widest possible participation for developing a long-range plan. It is democratic in its search for disparate opinions from all stakeholders and directly involves a cross-section of constituents from a State or region in setting a long-term policy agenda. It looks for common ground among participants in exploring and advocating strategies for the future. It brings in often-overlooked issues about quality of life. It helps formulate policy direction on public investments and government programs.

Visioning is an integrated approach to policy-making. With overall goals in view, it helps avoid piecemeal and reactionary approaches to addressing problems. It accounts for the relationship between issues, and how one problem’s solution may generate other problems or have an impact on another level of government. It is cooperative, with multi-agency involvement, frequently with joint interagency leadership.

Does visioning have special uses?

Visioning uses participation as a source of ideas in the establishment of long-range policy. It draws upon deeply-held feelings about overall directions of public agencies to solicit opinions about the future. After open consideration of many options, it generates a single, integrated vision for the future based on the consideration of many people with diverse viewpoints. When completed, it presents a democratically-derived consensus.

Visioning dramatizes the development of policies to get people involved in specific topics such as transportation infrastructure. In Ohio, the Access Ohio program was designed to establish goals and objectives for development of transportation projects and programs. Other States that have used visioning to establish long-range goals include Kansas, Georgia, Texas, Florida, Iowa, Oregon, and Minnesota.

Who participates? And how?

Invitations to participate are given to the general public or to a representative panel. A broad distribution of information is essential. This information must be simply presented, attractive, and rendered important and timely. It should also include clear goals of participation and show how comments will be used in the process. (See [Public Information Materials; Mailing Lists](#).)

Community residents participate through meetings and surveys. A typical method of involving local people is through a questionnaire format, seeking comments on present issues and future possibilities. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) A report card filled in with community opinions was used in Jacksonville, Florida. In Minnesota, opinions were elicited through small or large public meetings at locations distributed equitably throughout the state. In the Research Triangle region of North Carolina, participants drew pictures of their vision of the region's future and of transit opportunities in words and pictures on wall-sized sheets of paper.

How do agencies use the output?

Visioning helps agencies determine policy. Through widespread public participation, agencies become aware of issues and problems, different points of view, and competing demands. Drafting responses to comments aids in sharpening overall policy and assists in focusing priorities among goals, plans, or programs. Visioning also helps bring conflicts to the surface and resolve competing priorities.

Who leads a visioning process?

A chief governmental official can lead visioning. In several States, the Governor has made visioning a cornerstone of State policy planning for infrastructure investments and State operational departments. The governors of Oregon, Texas, Iowa, Minnesota, Georgia, Florida, and New Jersey have fostered visioning for their States.

Agencies also lead visioning projects. Statewide agencies led new visioning projects in Maine and Hawaii. Regional agencies led visioning projects in Jacksonville, Indianapolis, and Seattle.

What does visioning cost?

Visioning costs vary. The chief items are staff time and materials sufficient to set up and carry out the program. Staff people should include a leader committed to the process, a community participation specialist who is well-versed in the applicable policies, and staffers who can interpret and integrate participants' opinions from surveys and meetings. Meeting materials are minimal but can include large maps and newsprint pads and markers to record ideas. If forecasts of information are developed or if alternative scenarios are to be fleshed out, research and preparation time can be extensive.

How is it organized?

A specific time period is scheduled to develop the vision statement. The schedule incorporates sufficient time for framing issues, eliciting comments through surveys or meetings, recording statements from participants, and integrating them into draft and final documents.

Visioning staff members are typically assigned from existing agencies that are familiar with issues and essential contacts to be maintained. In Minnesota and New Jersey, staff was assigned from the State planning office; in Jacksonville, Florida, from the Community Council/Chamber of Commerce; in Ohio, from the Ohio Department of Transportation.

Is it flexible?

Visioning is extremely flexible in terms of scheduling and staff commitments. Scheduling takes weeks or months. Staff is temporarily or permanently assigned to the project.

Preparation for visioning is crucial and touches on many complex issues. Advance work is essential to give time for staff to prepare the overall program, agendas, mailing lists, questionnaires, and methods of presentation and follow-up. (See [Mailing Lists; Public Opinion Surveys](#).) The visioning program should be carefully scheduled to maximize local input and response time prior to selecting final policies.

How is it used with other techniques?

The visioning process involves many techniques of public involvement. In the Seattle area, the visioning process on regional growth and mobility futures included the most extensive regional public involvement effort ever conducted in the area: symposiums, workshops, newspaper tabloid inserts, public hearings, open houses, surveys, and community meetings. (See [Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats; Public Meetings/Hearings; Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses; Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

Visioning leads toward other public involvement techniques. As a policy umbrella, it can precede establishment of a civic advisory committee and guide its work in reviewing individual projects or programs. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) It leads to brainstorming sessions or charrettes to solve individual problems. (See [Brainstorming; Charrettes](#).) Visioning is often the basis for public evaluation and implementation; it led to performance monitoring of State agency activities in Oregon, Minnesota, Iowa, and Texas, followed by reports to the public.

What are the drawbacks?

Time and staff requirements are significant to maintain contact with numerous community participants and carry the program forward. The numbers of participants varies from 100 community leaders in Jacksonville to an estimated 10,000 residents in Minnesota. Listening to participants can consume several months' time. Full-time effort is required of staff when the process is in motion.

The staff needs patience to deal with so many diverse views and individuals, time and schedule requirements, and complex issues and interrelationships. Finally, visioning is a one-time event and remains on a generalized policy level; there is a substantial risk that the resulting document will not satisfy all interest groups.

When is visioning most effective?

Visioning is of maximum use at an early point in the establishment or revision of policies or goals. Used in this way, it demonstrates openness to new ideas or concepts suggested by the public. For maximum effect, a visioning project should have the active support of elected officials, agency heads, and community groups.

Visioning is useful:

- To set the stage for short-range planning activities;
- To set new directions in policy;
- To review existing policy;
- When integration between issues is required;
- When a wide variety of ideas should be heard; and
- When a range of potential solutions is needed.

For further information:

- Iowa Department of Management (Futures Agenda), (515) 281-3322
- Jacksonville Community Council (Quality Indicators for Progress), Jacksonville, Florida, (904) 356-0800
- Minnesota Planning (Minnesota Milestones), St. Paul, Minnesota, (612) 296-3985
- Ohio Department of Transportation (Access Ohio), Columbus, Ohio, (614) 466-7170
- Oregon Progress Board (Oregon Shines/Oregon Benchmarks), Salem, Oregon, (503) 373-1220
- Puget Sound Regional Council (Vision 2020), Seattle, Washington, (206) 464-7090

SMALL GROUP TECHNIQUES

What are small group techniques?

Small groups have fewer than 20 or so members, making it easier for people to actively participate. They meet as small gatherings or as break-outs of large meetings and offer many opportunities for creative, flexible interchange of ideas and lively, meaningful participation.

Small group techniques help people participate freely and actively. They include special activities or formats that help interest and engage people. They foster active participation and steer participants toward constructive activities and dialogue. They help avoid complaint-oriented or conflict-driven sessions.

Small group techniques have certain basic characteristics:

- They emphasize active participation and interaction;
- They are usually run by a group leader or facilitator;
- They have a task, theme, or goal;
- They help reach consensus or develop priorities;
- They gather a range of ideas, opinions, and concerns;
- They are applied to either planning or project development;
- In a breakout group, a small group task reflects the larger group agenda; and
- Breakout groups report back to the larger group.

Specific small group techniques covered in this section include breakout groups, workshops, seminars, community juries, roundtables, study circles, conflict utilization opinionaires, decision science, delphi, dialogue facilitation, nominal group process, open space technology, Samoan circle, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), synetics, and value analysis. Brainstorming is also used in small groups and is discussed as a separate technique. (See [Brainstorming](#).)

The definitions given here are generated from common practice and various materials. However, the techniques are far from standardized, and their names, conduct, and organization vary throughout the country. Some techniques overlap, or a “hybrid” meeting or process uses elements from each. The key to using them is to identify the element or structure that addresses the needs of the participants and the goals of the meeting.

Why are small group techniques useful?

They encourage broad participation and promote a sense of equality among members. Individuals speak and are heard. Participants ask questions and comment freely.

Small group techniques foster interaction between participants. People are encouraged to speak frankly and openly. Ground rules, such as allowing only one person to speak at a time, help level the playing field between participants. Open and fair meeting processes promote give-and-take and interaction.

They make a larger meeting more efficient and productive. Break-out groups use various techniques to address a specific issue. Many ideas are brought forth in small groups that might not surface in a large gathering. The larger gathering becomes more productive as break-out group findings on specific topics are reported and incorporated.

Small group techniques foster dissemination of information to the broader community. Representatives meet in small sessions, cover issues, and report back to their constituents. The

Portland, Oregon, Metro holds small group meetings in neighborhoods throughout the region. Spokespersons from each group report back to their peers, their elected officials, and other people about transit issues.

These techniques usually make meetings more fun and interesting. The interactive nature of small group activities makes them spirited and engaging. People are willing to attend and participate when they know the session will be interesting and productive. The Dallas, Texas, Area Rapid Transit uses small group meetings to obtain candid reactions to innovative proposals. (See [Improving Meeting Attendance](#).)

Small group techniques offer a strategy for achieving a meeting goal. They help keep conversation on track or establish a step-by-step process for handling discussion. They help develop consensus or an action plan. To review elements of its 2020 long-range plan, the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) sponsored four issues groups—economic development, goods movement, and mobility and quality of life—made up of key stakeholders.

Are there special uses?

Small group techniques are useful on controversial issues. They provide a non-threatening venue for all sides to express opinions and encourage mutual respect and constructive listening. They help reduce tension and defuse polarized groups.

Small groups provide a forum for technical issues. Complex issues and concepts receive needed explanation and review, because each individual has time to absorb material and ask questions. Participants feel more confident in an analysis if they understand the technical issues and methods involved. The Connecticut DOT used small groups of participants organized by modal interest (i.e., those favoring transit and those favoring highway options) to develop alternatives for repair or replacement of a major bridge.

Small group meetings can re-charge a participatory process with interesting and different ways of looking at a topic. Disenchanted group members are encouraged to rejoin if they see a way to achieve goals in a new and focused process. To critique and revise its public involvement program, the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) called together 60 community leaders and organized them into small groups to work on specific elements of the process.

Participants affect the substance of plans and projects through small group work. The Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission used a small group to simplify its Transportation Improvement Program for easier understanding by the public.

How are small groups structured?

The style, format, and organization of small group meetings vary. Some techniques are familiar and regularly used; others (frequently with fancy names) are less common. Some use innovative, creative group processes.

- **Breakout groups** are subdivisions of a larger meeting to deal with specific issues. Small groups meet in separate areas—corners of a large room or several smaller rooms. Each group appoints or elects a discussion leader, and each participant has a chance to express an opinion. Afterwards, groups report back to the large meeting. In neighborhood meetings to discuss transit service issues, the Boston Transportation Department asked breakout groups to identify priority issues. After each group reported, the larger meeting set priorities to report to the regional transit authority. In Washington, D.C., breakout groups from sub-regions worked within a larger meeting on the area's long-range transportation plan and reported their area concerns to the larger group.

Some small groups are established from the beginning, instead of being formed from a larger group. The format is designed specifically to accomplish the goals of the session.

- **Workshops** are small groups that focus on one or more topics, working intensively over a short period of time. (See [Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats](#).)
- **Seminars** give participants an opportunity to learn about a particular topic and exchange information and viewpoints. A seminar usually focuses on a single topic. Often, a seminar offers a short presentation followed by discussion by a panel or participants. A seminar is distinctive in the high level of interest and knowledge participants bring to it. In Wilmington, Delaware, the Metropolitan Area Planning Coordinating Council began a larger meeting with a seminar with experts to stimulate discussion. Wisconsin DOT sponsored five issue-based seminars on land use, economic development, urban and rural issues, tourism, and freight shipping for its long-range transportation plan.
- **Community juries** consist of individuals impaneled to hear testimony related to a specific issue. Jurors, chosen for their impartiality, hear reviews of an issue by neutral experts. The jury discusses and deliberates and subsequently issues its findings. Always non-binding and with no legal standing, the findings of such juries can pinpoint “fatal flaws” or gauge public reaction. The Minnesota DOT assembled a community jury to determine public attitudes toward congestion pricing as a traffic-reduction measure. The jury met for five days of hearings with more than 20 witnesses and voted in favor of reducing traffic but against congestion pricing. The jury then voted for increases in the gas tax and for allowing its use in funding transit improvements.
- **Roundtables** are meetings, usually around a table, to examine an issue through discussion by all participants. Each participant is a stakeholder, so the issue is debated from many sides. Free discussion and diverse opinions are encouraged. Experts in a field can participate, as well as residents, business people, and interest groups. Roundtables are often breakout groups, focusing on one or more topics related to the entire issue or project. Seminars and workshops often use a roundtable format, but what is distinctive about roundtables is their emphasis on thorough discussion of an issue. The Kansas DOT, Albany’s Capital District Transportation Committee, and the San Diego Association of Governments use roundtables in many projects and long-range planning efforts. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority held numerous roundtable discussions with community and business leaders to identify priorities for its regional transit plan.
- **Study circles** hold a series of meetings to discuss critical issues. Members are assigned readings and other tasks between meetings. The process is very structured, often using study guides and discussion questions developed by an agency or a steering committee. Participants discuss each facet of the issue in detail. The same group meets periodically to investigate and debate the issue. Participants are appointed or self-selected. In Lima, Ohio, 40 churches with Caucasian, African American, and other members held study circles led by trained leaders to discuss ways to alleviate racial tensions. Study circles on race relations have been formed in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana; Portsmouth, Virginia; and Columbus, Ohio.

How do people work within a small group?

Problem-solving strategies are essential for small group accomplishment. Small groups need a specific format or process to achieve the goals of a meeting. These alphabetically listed techniques can be used within the specific meeting structures cited above:

- A **conflict utilization opinionaire** uses survey techniques to explore how individuals deal with conflict. It enables a group to use writing and discussion to deal with conflicts or controversies. Before addressing the project issue at hand, a group of 8 to 20 people meet and fill out a

questionnaire or complete a writing task to express their attitudes about conflict. They then discuss how staff or leaders should deal with it and suggest the best techniques for reaching consensus or understanding.

- **Decision science** is a process of reaching consensus or formulating alternatives. It narrows the focus of discussion to the distinguishing characteristics of various options. A group begins by agreeing on elements that are not in dispute. The group agrees on as many points as possible; for example, “We all agree that we should minimize the impact on the agricultural properties,” or “We think improved access to that abandoned factory will encourage economic development.” Eventually the group reaches points on which they do not agree. By laying a foundation of mutually agreed-upon assumptions, decision science enables subsequent discussion to directly target unresolved issues. The technique requires a facilitator to develop the consensus items and organize discussion to resolve an issue or formulate a group of alternatives. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service used this technique to develop water management alternatives and explore structural versus operational solutions to water resource issues.
- **Delphi** (also known as policy delphi) reaches consensus by asking a small group of experts to give advice. The results can generate further discussion at committee or public meetings. The delphi process begins when an agency distributes questionnaires to a panel of experts, whose responses are then tabulated. Results are sent back to the panelists, who reflect on their colleagues’ opinions and either alter their stances or provide reasons for holding to their own positions. This process is continued until basic concepts and elements of a project or plan are identified by a majority. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) conducted a delphi process to define critical issues facing the region and to suggest possibilities for the future. These findings were presented at ARC’s Outlook Conference in May 1992 to launch the VISION 2020 public process. Delphi is considered a survey technique as well as a way of involving small groups.
- **Dialogue facilitation** lets participants speak on deeply-held personal beliefs about an issue. People hold conversations that are outside the bounds of the topic under discussion. They can focus around a meal as an icebreaker. Here, individuals do not know which side of the main issue other people are on; they chat about families, interests, etc. Participants then discuss the main issue—not as enemies or antagonists, but as individuals. Consensus is not expected. Rather, the goals are to open up communication and knowledge that differing opinions can be held. Using a principle of family therapy (you have to live together, so you might as well get along!), dialogue facilitation asks each person to participate in conversation.
- A **nominal group process** is a term used for several different methods of identifying issues and priorities. One variation, employed by the Pennsylvania DOT, uses index cards for participants to register priority issues and other information; the cards are then tallied or analyzed. In another variation, participants generate ideas silently as individuals, and then list them as a group. They discuss what each means and then silently and individually rank the ideas. Yet another method is to have experts discuss an issue with a small group and prepare suggestions for participants’ reactions. To develop priorities for watershed management, the New Jersey Water Resources Authority held successive small group sessions. In the first, after a brief presentation, experts and participants discussed the issue. In the next session, the experts presented in ballot form an array of personal concerns and opinions culled from the previous discussion. The group used the ballot to rank their collective views. The top quarter of the selected priorities formed the basis of a survey mailed to other people participating in the public involvement effort. The results helped to define the Watershed Management Plan.
- **Open space technology** is a method of assigning meeting leadership. The Colorado DOT used this to manage breakout sessions of a large group. Participants introduced a topic or concern, wrote it on a card, and posted it on the wall. Examining the cards to choose a topic, group members signed their names on the card of their choice. Topics with the largest number of names were chosen for discussion groups. People who introduced the topic were responsible for

leading a breakout session on it. The Colorado DOT chose issues from these sessions as part of a management review effort.

- A **Samoan circle** derived its name very loosely, with only vague reference to the Pacific island group called Samoa. In fact, the formal structure began during a land use study in Chicago. Its purpose is to organize discussion of controversial issues or within large groups, instead of holding a free-for-all, no-holds-barred complaint session. It serves to identify stakeholders or to give priorities to actions to be taken or areas of agreement, although this is not a frequent used. A Samoan circle has no facilitator, chair, or moderator. Participants are expected to maintain their own discipline. They gather in two concentric circles—an inner circle with a table and four chairs, and an outer circle, with ample walking and aisle space. Everyone begins in the outer circle. The issue is presented, and discussion begins. Those most interested take chairs in the inner circle. Those less interested stay in the outer circle. All are able to move in or out of the center as the discussion flows or topics change. Each speaker makes a comment or asks a question. Speakers are not restricted in what they say or how they say it, but they must sit in the inner circle. Someone wishing to speak stands behind a chair; this signals those already in the circle to relinquish their chairs. No outside conversations are allowed. Comments are often recorded. Votes of opinions held by non-speakers are taken at the end, if desired. To close a meeting, empty seats are taken away one by one until there are no more chairs. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers frequently uses the technique for both internal and public meetings to define priorities and stakeholders in project planning. The Village of Northfield, Illinois, used it to organize discussion of controversial proposals for community development plans in a forum of 150 residents and officials. The technique was used in a meeting of FHWA officials and representatives of six Midwestern states in discussing ways to improve working relationships around environmental protection concerns related to projects and planning.
- **SWOT** (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis takes an analytic approach to a concept or issue, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, along with opportunities it represents and threats to its success. Using those criteria, the group evaluates chances for success or effectiveness. Priorities are resolved by voting and reaching consensus within the group. The Iowa DOT used the technique in establishing the basis for its strategic plan. In a related technique, force field analysis, a group defines “helping” or “hindering” forces and their effects on the group’s objective or discussion.
- **Synetics** re-charges a discussion by diverting it away from the issue being addressed. After discussing an unrelated topic, a group analyzes the dynamics of the side discussion to shed light on interpersonal relationships during discussion of the main topic.
- **Value analysis** helps evaluate alternatives and their consequences in terms of values (say, a clean environment or governmental cost reductions) widely held in the community. This technique is frequently used in the utilities industry. Participants compute the attractiveness of each alternative, assign points for each value, then total them into composite scores. The technique shows what values are in conflict and what trade-offs might be possible. It is often used in siting decisions—for example, by the Florida Power Corporation. It has been used by the Department of Energy in planning for a Tank Waste Remediation System in Washington State and for the Santa Barbara County (California) Oil Transportation Plan. The Oregon DOT has used it to evaluate specific agency actions in relation to project alternatives’ analyses. The Ohio Housing Finance Agency used it to establish suburban integration incentives in Cleveland.

How do agencies use the output?

Agencies use results to refine plans or projects and move a process forward. Small groups generate information, ideas, and opinions. The Wisconsin DOT interviews small groups about preferences and viewpoints. Small groups are a way to achieve consensus.

Small groups provide creative solutions or new ideas and scenarios. In a small group session in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood, a local resident architect sketched out a bold idea that became the conceptual design for a major roadway reconstruction. Small groups foster further interaction between agencies and the public, often with a heightened level of trust.

Who leads?

Agency staff or outside experts lead small groups, but training is necessary to lead them effectively. Training overcomes individual worries about acting as a discussion leader.

Community people also lead small groups. A neutral outside facilitator is important for small groups dealing with difficult issues. Some agencies offer training for local residents in leading discussions; others use outside experts. In Wilson, North Carolina, a local bank donated the time and expertise of several senior staff members to supplement agency managers. Working on the county's strategic planning/visioning process, the bank staff helped facilitate breakout groups focused on specific transportation topics.

Small groups usually have one or two leaders. Co-leaders are chosen from opposing sides of an issue to make sure all positions are adequately heard. This is important when no one group leader is viewed as neutral or objective on the issue being discussed.

The choice of a leader depends on the complexity of the technique. In cases where a specialized technique is attempted, it is important to have an experienced leader.

What do small group techniques cost?

While actual monetary costs are minimal, staff time for preparation and management is sometimes considerable. The staff records events and reports back to a larger group or to the agency. A person is assigned the role of recorder to write down ideas on newsprint or blackboard. In some instances, agency staff facilitate. Triangle Transit Authority in North Carolina used staff members as facilitators of sub-groups analyzing transit potential and land use/development impacts of a new fixed guideway.

Training staff or participants to run small groups is a factor. Training improves productivity and leads to fewer meetings, thus offsetting training costs to some extent. One alternative is retaining consultants to manage small group sessions. Also, with minimal training, participants can play other roles that help cut outside costs, acting as recorders or reporters or in other support roles. These roles reduce the need for staff effort.

Meeting facilities become a cost when a neutral location is desired. To contain costs, publicly-owned facilities such as schools or colleges should be considered.

Equipment, supplies, and refreshments usually have modest costs. Adequate provisions engender good will between a sponsoring agency and group participants.

How are they organized?

The format and organization of small group work need to be carefully conceived. Good preparation is necessary. The choice of technique must be targeted to the intended goals and topics of the meeting and whether the process is short- or long-term. The organization of the process should aim to achieve limited goals within a specified deadline. Policy-makers must be informed of the process and its goals to assist in its support.

Small group techniques must respond to both agency and participant needs. Agencies may want to solicit opinions, develop action items, and evaluate alternatives, while participants want to explore impacts, suggest various alternative actions, and make their voices heard. To remedy low attendance at large regional forums, the New Jersey DOT sent staff out to hear from certain populations about its long-range plan. Small groups met on Saturday afternoons in senior citizen centers, colleges, and center-city neighborhoods.

Participants need to feel that a meeting is structured well enough to produce results. Audiovisual techniques—video, overheads, displays, laptops—are just as important in small groups as in large meetings, particularly when technical information or concepts are being discussed. (See [Video Techniques](#).) They help engage participants, grab their attention, and establish a firm beginning. Meetings should be dynamic, fun, and interesting for participants. A method of summarizing, documenting, and reporting findings and agreements must be established before a meeting. Even a large meeting that is not well-attended can produce results when participants work in small groups to focus on specific issues or tasks.

The process must be fair and open. All participants need to have equal roles and be treated as peers. A group must be as inclusive of as many points of view as possible. Potential interests and stakeholders must be identified before assembling a small group, so that no one is ignored. If a large number of interests are represented, agencies often hold more than one small group session.

A method for selecting leaders must be determined before a group meets—whether leaders are to be appointed or chosen by the group. In some cases, it is appropriate to train small group leaders and clarify the responsibilities they are to undertake.

Participants need to understand the process, their role, and the expected outcome of a meeting. As in a larger session, the context, purpose, and goal of a meeting should be carefully explained and understood. If the process is unusual, participants need an animated leader to explain it and carry it forward.

Specialized and unusual techniques have specific guidelines for implementation that should be carefully explained to a group. Before beginning a meeting, it is essential to review the use of small groups, the proposed format, and the procedures, as well as possible issues that may arise and the results anticipated.

Adequate facilities and supplies are important. Groups use easels with newsprint and markers to record ideas. Refreshments help create a comfortable, informal atmosphere. Equipment such as overhead projectors aids in reviewing a proposal. Breakout rooms are desirable for small-group sessions that are part of larger meetings. Supplies must be available for specific techniques, such as cards for the open space technique.

Implementation validates both the findings and the process. If follow-up is required, staff or appropriate parties make sure it is done. A small group that is part of a larger gathering should be linked back to it. Pennsylvania DOT held large public meetings for its statewide pedestrian and bicycle plan, breaking into smaller facilitated sessions. Participants identified critical design problems as they affect cyclists and pedestrians. The groups then offered possible solutions and reported their key findings to the large group.

How are they used with other techniques?

Small groups must be integrated into an overall public involvement strategy. A regular series of small group meetings ascertains participants' views. Small group meetings are held periodically to update community groups and interested people on the progress of a planning effort or project development. Such meetings supplement larger group meetings by developing detailed information or exploring specific issues.

Small groups adopt techniques available to larger groups, including charrettes, facilitation, visioning, and surveys. (See [Charrettes](#); [Facilitation](#); [Visioning](#); [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) Alternative dispute resolution techniques such as mediation are used when an impasse is reached. (See [Negotiation and Mediation](#).)

Small groups can meet by teleconferencing. The use of telecommunications brings people together without the need for extensive travel. (See [Teleconferencing](#).)

What are the drawbacks?

Preparation takes time and extends a project or planning process. But small groups also save time in the long run if they provide opportunities for many people to participate and become familiar with a proposal's its elements and impacts.

Small groups require care and feeding. Space must be available and notices distributed promptly and to the right people. Staff often lead meetings or record their progress. Agencies sometimes provide a neutral site and refreshments for the group.

The support of small groups requires a commitment from both the agency and the public. Both need to be assured that small group meetings are worthwhile, productive, and needed and that the results will be of use in the overall process of public involvement. It is sometimes appropriate to have agency officials participate in small groups or observe the process to demonstrate its utility.

Are they flexible?

Small groups are inherently flexible. They are used in a variety of situations, with a number of different organizing techniques, at various times in the process, at nearly any location, and with a wide variety of participants. They are organized to respond to specific issues and participants. Also, small groups meet just about anywhere. Many meet in public agency offices, schools, or universities; some in private business facilities. Staff members from the New Jersey DOT have met with small groups in private homes. (See [Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events](#).)

Small groups contribute to almost any larger process. The intended use of small groups must be identified early in a meeting process so interested people can comment. In a large meeting, breakout sessions should be identified on the agenda.

When are they used most effectively?

Small groups are effective at many different times in a process. They are effective at the beginning to alleviate polarization and early perceptual problems. When a process stalls, small groups re-start public involvement or move it forward. They are used before issues reach an impasse, or if participants are feeling excluded. They are used in either planning or project development to prioritize issues or work on action items.

For further information:

- Breakout groups: Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, Washington, D.C., (202) 962-3200
- Community juries: Minnesota Department of Transportation, (612) 296-3000
- Decision science: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (415) 989-1446
- Delphi: Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2575
- Dialogue facilitation: Public Conversation Project, Cambridge, Massachusetts, (617) 491-1585

- Nominal group process: Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, (717) 783-1068
- Open space technology: Colorado Department of Transportation, (303) 757-9163
- Roundtables:
 - Capital District Transportation Committee, Albany, New York, (518) 458-2161
 - Kansas Department of Transportation, (913) 296-2252
- Samoan circle: Dallas Area Rapid Transit, (214) 749-2581
- Seminars: Metropolitan Area Planning Coordinating Council, Wilmington, Delaware, (302) 737-6205
- Study circles: Study Circle Resource Center, (203) 928-2616
- Value analysis:
 - Oregon Department of Transportation, (503) 986-3455
 - Washington State Department of Energy, (509) 376-1065

Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS

C. TAKING INITIAL ACTION STEPS

Face-to-face contact and two-way communication are vital elements of public involvement. Meetings can provide both. Here are some steps an agency can take to get people together:

- ✓ **Meet with community groups to discuss and set up a meeting schedule.**
Contact community groups to establish a basic meeting schedule. Optimize participation by asking them what kinds of meetings should take place and how often they should occur.
- ✓ **Consider the scope and substance of meetings.**
Outline the goals of a meeting or series of meetings in advance, so that participants can comment and offer suggestions. Consider if general meetings need to be supplemented by meetings focused on specific topics for specialized audiences. Share findings and ask if further development or discussion of individual points is desirable. Explain how and when agency decisions are made and how meeting output will affect decisions.
- ✓ **Select organizing principles for the meeting(s).**
Explore different types of meetings that may attract interest and outline potential meeting structures, so that maximum participation occurs. Vary sponsorship or leadership of meetings.
- ✓ **Place the meeting in the context of the whole plan or program, including decision-making.**
Anticipate where the process will go and why. Determine from the beginning what information is needed, when it is needed, and how it will be incorporated into agency decision-making. Make this context clear to participants, so they understand how their input will affect the plan or project.
- ✓ **Evaluate the approach with participant advisors.**
Seek perceptions and advice on the process from people outside the agency. Evaluate whether the intended scope, substance, and style of meeting are likely to be beneficial to the agency itself and to the participants.