

Chapter 4. USING SPECIAL TECHNIQUES TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION

A. HOLDING SPECIAL EVENTS

People like special events now and then. These unique occasions are light-hearted and intended to be fun for participants. They have a holiday-like feeling clearly different from day-to-day meetings and hearings. They give community people opportunities to meet others in a friendly, non-threatening setting and share their ideas. People like the freedom and openness of pleasurable events that do not demand immediate action or response.

Nearly any public involvement program benefits by incorporating special, one-time events. They complement many techniques by providing exhilarating breaks during a larger and longer process. A special event does not require a commitment to hold another such occasion, unless evaluation determines it is likely to be useful and appropriate.

Special events reach new participants. Individuals who have not participated in transportation planning or project development become interested because of exposure to agency work at a special event. Special events help current participants recruit neighbors to the process and demonstrate why it can be fun. With the help of participant advisors, an agency can determine if a special event is appropriate and if its timing can be integrated with other community events.

During special events in a public involvement program, messages about transportation—while clearly a motivating force—should be understated to keep the occasion light and friendly.

Special events take many forms. Two techniques have potentially significant use for transportation planning and project development:

- Transportation fairs; and
- Games and contests.

TRANSPORTATION FAIRS

What is a transportation fair?

A transportation fair is an event used to interest community members in transportation and in specific projects or programs. It is typically a one-day event, heavily promoted to encourage people to attend. Attractions such as futuristic vehicles can be used to bring people to the fair, and noted personalities also draw participants. New Jersey Transit holds an annual fair in a transit terminal with a festival aimed toward children—including participatory and educational exhibits.

A transportation fair focuses on visual elements, such as exhibits, videos, and maps or models of projects. A speaker or presenter is not required but can help focus the attention of viewers on the purposes of the fair. A fair gears individual displays toward a desired message. Once prepared, exhibits can be used again at another location and date.

A transportation fair has these basic features:

- Visual interest and excitement;
- Variety in exhibits: maps, photos, models, slide shows, videos, full-size vehicles, give-away items;
- Accessibility in a central location for the target audience;
- Extensive publicity to attract participants;
- Attraction for a wide variety of people;
- Ability to elicit comments and points of view of participants—always on a voluntary basis; and
- Impermanence.

Why is it useful?

A transportation fair presents information to the public. Participants are encouraged to view exhibits, ask questions, consider information, and give comments. In San Francisco, a commuter mobile van travels from show to show to promote alternative means of commuting.

A transportation fair creates interest and dramatizes a project or program. Graphics present goals and messages in a comprehensible and visually interesting way. Interactive audiovisual and computer-based displays make programs come alive and encourage public comment. (See [Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks](#).)

A fair is a one-time event. With good publicity, it becomes a known opportunity for people to participate in transportation planning. The date and place can be chosen to fit within an agency schedule. It can be held annually, as in Boston's World-Class Commuting Day. A fair helps agencies or organizations understand public reactions at a specific point in time.

A fair keeps participants informed, interested, and up-to-date. Sharing information and discussing issues gives participants a status report on projects and programs. At a fair, people become educated on technical issues and gain a better understanding of the effort involved and milestones achieved.

Does it have special uses?

A fair provides an opportunity for casual community input. As an informal short-term event, it can be held in central locations where many people pass by, such as a store downtown or a shopping mall. (See [Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events](#).) A fair asks participants to focus on a project's or program's components and details and offer advice and comment. For example, in Idaho twelve

transportation fairs were held in urban and rural regions to talk about statewide transportation improvements.

A fair emphasizes specific, positive points about a subject. It can include exhibits of all types to highlight the wide variety of people, organizations, and effort involved in a project or program. It allows an agency or organization to point up salient, desirable points about a project, while responding to potential drawbacks.

Who participates? And how?

Fair attendees are self-selected. Responding to publicity, individuals decide whether or not to attend—often based on the location and date of the fair. Because a fair is not an invitational event, a representative sample of community groups or stakeholders cannot be expected to attend. Despite this self-selection, a diversity in viewpoints is usually represented.

People participate through taking part in activities. Attendees examine the presentations and ask questions about the exhibits. At a typical fair, before attendees leave they are encouraged to fill out questionnaires or response forms with written comments, which are collected and analyzed for input. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

How do agencies use the output?

The principal output is improved community awareness. Written and oral comments by community residents are collected at the fair and used as input to a project or program. This information may be anecdotal but, with analysis, may be of use within the sponsoring organization. As a special example, fairs were held in the Phoenix, Arizona, area to help employers present alternative commuting ideas and programs to employees and get their feedback.

Comments should be used in association with other community input. Comments assist agencies in becoming aware of opinions and stances of participants, often before they become solidified or difficult to modify. Because they are made in a casual atmosphere, the comments are sometimes more conciliatory than would be the case in a different setting.

Who leads a transportation fair?

Agencies or private groups sponsor fairs. Public agencies hold fairs to detail a specific project and its impacts and to demonstrate support for it. Private transportation management groups hold fairs to attract new members or explain new programs. Representation of public officials at a transportation fair can be productive, depending on the fair's purpose. For example, in the San Francisco area, employers sponsor fairs, with assistance from public agencies.

A transportation fair requires no leader on the day of the event. However, a fair can be scheduled with specific times for presentations or brief talks or to introduce featured attractions such as celebrities. At such times, a moderator or other person is needed to make introductions.

What are the costs?

A fair requires support staff within an agency, and the work required can be substantial. Finding a site—usually on land or in buildings that are privately-owned—takes advance preparation. Agency representatives must be alerted to attend if needed to respond to inquiries or explain technical issues.

Material needs are extensive. Graphics should be sufficiently large and well-prepared to address principal issues. Photographs may be required for orientation. Slide presentations are often desirable.

Substantial exhibition room is essential. Written materials can supplement graphic presentations. Take-away souvenirs, including buttons, maps, brochures, or imaginative graphics, are useful reminders of the fair's subject. For example, an annual transportation fair for an employer in the Washington, D.C., region includes table-top exhibits by employers, give-away items with emblazoned information, and contests or drawings for seed money to start a vanpool. (See [Public Information Materials; Games and Contests.](#))

How is a transportation fair organized?

A fair is managed by an existing organization. It may have a chairperson or director, depending on the extent or importance of the event. A fair needs staff to manage the exhibitors, oversee production of graphic or written materials, and make the physical arrangements on the day of the event. In the Los Angeles area, for example, fairs are sponsored by private firms and managed by their employer transportation coordinators.

Organizational meetings are necessary to set the policy and goals for the fair, select a date and place, solicit exhibitors, and develop publicity for wide public distribution. Specific assignments and delegation of responsibilities help assure on-time production of exhibits.

How is it used with other techniques?

Not a stand-alone approach, a transportation fair pairs well with other techniques and shows the products of public involvement, such as the results of a brainstorming session. (See [Brainstorming.](#)) It can be sponsored by a civic advisory committee to show work in progress. (See [Civic Advisory Committees.](#)) With videos or fixed exhibitions, fairs can display goals or accomplishments of a public agency. (See [Video Techniques; Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks.](#))

A fair helps interest community residents in transportation or sets the stage for upcoming events, such as a complex, large-scale project. It is used to elicit candidates for membership in a civic advisory committee. It also is used to present awards to individuals who have contributed to improvement of transportation services.

What are the drawbacks?

A fair cannot replace other techniques. As a one-time event with self-selected participants, it is not usually representative of all interests. It is temporary in intent and thus does not meet Federal standards for continuing public involvement. It cannot replace a public process that records statements in a more formal manner, where local people are certain they are being heard by appropriate authorities. (See [Public Meetings/Hearings.](#))

A transportation fair does not bring public consensus. There is no deliberation between potentially opposing groups. The principal intent in a fair is to disseminate information, not to receive ideas. Attempts by the sponsor to derive consensus from a fair may cause problems; the sponsor becomes vulnerable to charges of not taking public involvement seriously.

Representative comments cannot be expected because a fair is not likely to include all potential participants. In fact, comments from participants are appreciated because they are to some extent unexpected. In certain instances, little or no feedback will be directly useful to an agency. However, unarticulated comments do not mean that the fair was a failure; many participants do not view writing comments as an essential element of their enjoyment of the exhibits at the fair.

For further information:

- Caravan for Commuters, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 973-7189
- Commuter Transportation Services, Los Angeles, California, (213) 380-7750
- New Jersey Transit, (201) 491-7079
- Regional Public Transportation Authority, Phoenix, Arizona, (602) 262-7242
- Rides (Commuter Services), San Francisco, California, (415) 861-7665
- Washington, D.C., Council of Governments Ride-finders Network, (202) 962-3327

GAMES AND CONTESTS

What are games and contests?

Games and contests are special ways to attract and engage people who might not otherwise participate. They often vividly demonstrate issues and the consequences of decisions. They are unusual, lively, and more stimulating than formal meetings or reports. People play games and enter contests for diversion or entertainment, a prize or an objective, or for the possibility of winning.

Games entice people to think about different alternatives, alignments, modes, densities, heights, land uses, and other transportation issues. They engage people interactively and are more effective than a matrix or other written description to show the consequences of actions. They enhance participation by giving people tangible, interesting, easy-to-relate-to activities rather than reams of reading material or meetings to attend in the middle of winter.

Contests and games are unique methods for getting peoples' attention in subtle yet comprehensive ways that reach more people and increase awareness, overall understanding, and sophistication about specific issues.

Games and contests help generate publicity about planning and project development. Publicity about a planning process is sometimes hard to generate, but involving people in a game or contest often results in significant coverage because people think they are fun. The fun factor is important to acknowledge, because it breaks down barriers between technicians and community people, generates good will for an agency, and gives people something interesting to look forward to.

Games and contests typically include:

- Board games—for the table-top or the computer;
- Card games;
- Computer simulation games or contests;
- Crossword puzzles or other word games;
- Games of chance, such as raffles; and
- Essay, design, or poster contests.

Why are they useful?

Games alert people to a broad range of issues, give them information, and pinpoint their transportation priorities by asking them to make decisions and tradeoffs. Games that involve choices—for instance, placing game pieces to indicate acceptable development densities or spending play money for industry or environmental protection—help clarify priorities, identify the range of positions, and aid agency decision-making. In a game used by Triangle Transit Authority in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, participants decided on development densities at certain growth and transportation nodes in the region. By making choices about where to put development in relation to transportation, participants were able to see land use/transportation relationships, others' perspectives, and the implications of decisions. As part of long-term planning for light-rail extensions, the San Francisco County Transit Authority developed a game in which focus groups expressed preferences by placing colored tape (red for surface lines and green for subway sections) on a city map. The length of tape was determined by the amount of money available for the projects. Given the substantial difference in cost between subway and surface lines, participants—representing different points of view and different areas of the city—discussed alternatives, made tradeoffs, and finally agreed on mutually acceptable solutions that could be accomplished within budget. The game encouraged participants to expand their thinking from a local to a city-wide perspective and helped them understand the complex transportation decision-making process.

Contests encourage participants to bring in new and fresh ideas. The Boston, Massachusetts, Visions Contest, sponsored by a partnership of private industry, government agencies, and public utilities, was designed as a national contest to interest people in the future of the City. With substantial prizes to be awarded to several categories of winners, the contest attracted many people who wanted to express their visions of the future. The results led the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) to investigate in depth the feasibility of specific suggestions for its Washington Street Corridor.

Games and contests involve a broad variety of people who might not otherwise participate in planning and project development processes. No one is likely to be an expert at a custom-made game, so everyone starts at an equal level of skill; people who are neophytes in transportation planning play together with those more knowledgeable about planning and project development. For example, games that elicit value tradeoffs are much more effective than the “indifference trade-off method,” a complex, abstract process involving measuring preferences, assigning weights, and mathematically determining priorities. Few other participation techniques match games and contests for light-heartedness, playfulness, and liveliness.

Games and contests are interactive, requiring players to make conscious efforts to participate. In every game or contest, a player or contestant must understand instructions and then interact with other people playing the game or engaging in the contest. This interaction is rewarding and fruitful and makes participation a pleasure.

Playing a game or entering a contest is often educational. Participants may explore history or transportation issues or learn about regulations, transportation construction techniques, or geography. The MBTA used a crossword puzzle in a newsletter to explain transit planning and the concurrent land development process. This newsletter was sent to thousands of transit corridor residents, most of whom were not traditional participants in project development studies.

Games and contests generate publicity, because they grab the attention of people in a busy world, then provide a useful way for them to focus on an issue. They engage people quickly and involve their thoughts during the time it takes to play. They give a sense of accomplishment, leading beyond simple advertising. A major utility company used contests to promote its health plan options and health club programs by giving cash prizes to winners with the best T-shirt design.

Games are used in training agency public involvement staff to help them better understand the issues from a lay point of view. A number of computer games give players a chance to create new towns, complete with transportation lines, budgets, and impending natural and fiscal disasters. An urban planning computer game shows the interrelationships between urban growth and city management and investment.

Do they have special uses?

Games and contests sometimes change an agency’s image in the community. Agencies that have been thought of in the past as outsiders uninvolved in the community are seen in a different light when they sponsor a game or contest. The MBTA sponsored a children’s game for designs to be incorporated into the ceramic tiles of a new transit station in their neighborhood. Displaying community artwork permanently on the walls of the new station provided very conspicuous evidence that the MBTA was interested in involving the neighborhood in the transit-line extension.

Contests generate ideas for implementable projects. In St. Louis, Missouri, the Sierra Club sponsored a contest involving high school students to develop projects for which enhancement funds could be applied.

Games and contests are exploratory, stressing possibilities for change in the environment, transportation, and the places we live. They get participants to understand different perspectives and concerns by opening up opportunities. The annual contest called “Tour de Sol” is a showcase for

improving public understanding of the design and technology of electric vehicles. Major auto makers, colleges, specialty manufacturers, and the U.S. Department of Energy sponsor the rally and give prizes to entrants based on evaluations of vehicle range and efficiency.

Games are risk-free for participants. People are often willing to play a game in which they encounter the potential impacts, because there are no real-life consequences. Yet, by being involved, they see an issue from a different perspective—one that may be completely foreign to them.

Games and contests get parents involved through their children. Many children are interested in games and become engaged easily. Oregon Metro ran a transportation fair that provided child care and activities especially for children. The children's activity room offered a variety of toys and computer games for kids to engage in while parents walked around the fair. Creating a family event at which kids were welcome made it easier for parents to attend. In Boston, the MBTA developed a picture guide book for children, *Anna Discovers the T*, designed to teach children how to use the transit system—with the hope that children would help their parents learn as well. The MBTA also sponsored a contest for children to design a car card for transit vehicles promoting the children's guidebook. The contest was publicized through elementary schools and reached a broad audience.

Who participates? And how?

Games are played by interested community people, officials, or other stakeholders. Games and contests are distributed as widely as necessary to engage people who need to be aware of issues or themes and to open up communication lines. A game of chance, such as a raffle, reaches a large group of people and makes them aware of an issue. A group of merchants in Cambridge, Massachusetts, reached thousands of people during a transit construction project by giving away bicycles, roller skates, rides on an antique fire engine, free transit passes, a month of free parking, and a trip for two to Montreal. A suburban transportation management organization held a raffle to publicize ridesharing by giving away dinners for two, gift certificates, and bicycle tune-ups. These contests help increase communication between the agency and communities and make it easier to engage them in the future for input and help in making decisions.

Certain games are easily played at regular community meetings. Simple board games or charades are easy to play with any group. Role-playing board games can provide a central focus for a special meeting. The U.S. Department of Energy used a board game with the neighbors of its Fernald plant in Ohio to seek help in locating a site for atomic waste disposal. The board game was based on participants playing roles of managers of the site. (See [Role Playing](#).)

Computer games appeal to a limited group of participants. Computer simulation games should be geared to a wider audience than just the computer literate. Exciting, colorful graphics, icons, and simple instructions that walk users through the steps are key. They should entice play by people who may be unfamiliar with computer capabilities and are distrustful of computers. Computer games focused on role playing are helpful for people who would particularly benefit from seeing other perspectives. These include, for example, using a computer to illustrate what different floor area ratios would mean in terms of development density or to show how close various transit alignments would come to neighborhoods. (See [Computer Presentations and Simulations](#).)

Contests are often designed for special audiences. Participants who have considerable knowledge of technical issues are reached through specially designed contests. Contests that require abilities in art or poetry attract people with these special skills. The Neponset Greenway project in Massachusetts sponsored a logo design contest for its signage and maps that was judged by a professional jury.

Children enjoy tactile games and toys. To teach the various roles of people working for the railroad, Amtrak hands out paper engineer's caps describing people who make the railroad work. Printed on the back is a scene for children to color. Several railroad employees are hidden among the crowd, with a challenge for children to find all the people before the train leaves.

People participate as individuals by playing a game or figuring out a crossword puzzle. They also design posters or submit ideas for contests.

For meetings, small group board games with visual implements foster interaction. A board game used by the Santa Barbara, California, Community Development Department asked players to place blocks on development parcels following the allowable zoning. In a risk-free, non-threatening way, players were able to state preferences for development based on their own reasons. No judgments about positions were allowed, but, through evaluating the game, it became relatively easy for participants to see that the development allowed by the existing zoning would be very dense. In Dane County, Wisconsin, a similar game used a computer model to develop alternative comprehensive plans. Participants paint future land uses at a meeting, and the model estimates the future impacts. In a few seconds, numbers are produced showing the impacts of land uses on transportation, schools, and other infrastructure. A facilitated discussion to explore game results is often essential to enable participants to get the most out of a game.

Involving children requires outreach, since children do not generally attend meetings. Schools offer one of the best ways to reach children—through classes, extracurricular activities, or field trips. A school class won a contest sponsored by a major supermarket chain and developed a board game full of environmental tips. Such groups as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, or Camp Fire Girls are another good resource.

How do agencies use the output?

Agencies use games to learn people's priorities by incorporating ranking games at meetings. Canada's Saskatchewan Power used a game to explore what people wanted to see happen in the Saskatchewan River Delta. Participants used play money to invest in economic development or wildlife projects, helping the power company set priorities. Simple ranking of priorities using adhesive dots placed next to issues of concern is another way an agency learns about community priorities.

Agencies use games and contests to stimulate interest in planning issues or publicize project development. Contests are effective in reaching those not traditionally involved. As part of a school curriculum, the Missouri Highway and Transportation Department ran a contest that asked school children to describe verbally or illustrate what transportation means to them. About 900 students in 160 teams submitted contest entries. Contests help agencies increase the visibility of a process or project. They get people involved and interested in learning about the details of a project incorporated into the contest.

Games facilitate effective communication between an agency and a community. The U.S. Department of Energy uses a manual board game similar to Monopoly® at community meetings to help people understand the Department's fiscal constraints. For example, if a player lands on the first available place, Congress reduces the agency budget by \$11 million. Another example is a contest with a prize or a raffle to show an agency in a different, non-technical light.

Agencies use games for training, which helps staff understand their potential for public involvement processes. The MBTA created a board game called "On Track" to train its operators. Questions tested operators' customer-service skills and knowledge of the MBTA system and its history. They ranged from how to go the Children's Museum to what a bus driver should do if someone tries to board with a gorilla. Each question had three answers, ranked (using a dollar value) by degree of "correctness." Trainees got play money worth \$10,000 if they said the gorilla should ride in the back of the bus and be restrained by its owner; they were docked \$10,000 if they told the gorilla and its owner to get off the bus. Similarly, Pennsylvania DOT created "Citizen Lane," a board game used to train DOT employees on public involvement in project development, from preliminary design through construction. The one-hour game uses six sets of color-coded question cards for the phase of project development. The cards cover "incidents"—for example, what to do when 400 people show up at a room capable of holding 50—and "issues"—questions that challenge players to deal with potential major problems in a public involvement process. The "issues" cards require the six players to brainstorm together for an

answer. The questions cover material included in the DOT's handbook on public involvement. Agency personnel have been extremely enthusiastic about participating in workshops using "Citizen Lane." Such training efforts help staff understand what tools are useful and how games and contests that are engaging, fun, and easy to learn can contribute significantly to a public involvement process.

Names of contestants and game players can form the basis of a mailing list for agencies to contact interested parties and supply further information. Permission should be obtained prior to placing anyone's name on a list. (See [Mailing Lists](#).)

Who leads games and contests?

Contests are designed, promoted, and led by people who have a clear vision about the goals—whether the contest is for publicity, education, or more specific transportation planning options. An organizational leader is needed to support the contest through publicity; distribution, receipt, and tabulation of forms; and awarding of prizes.

Games require trained leaders who understand the game's goals. A leader must be enthusiastic and fully understand the process. Either agency staff members or outside consultants lead games. Guidance through a game may be required, even if the game is extremely well-developed. After the game, the leader must skillfully guide people through discussion and evaluation.

Games or contests are often designed to be played by individuals or in groups, sometimes with help or kibitzing from a friend or relative.

What are the costs?

Significant time and skills are required in developing the concept for a board game, creating the physical board itself, and manufacturing the game for multiple users. Outlining a concept takes as little as a week, but a single, hand-produced board game can take six weeks or more from concept through final production. Outside consultants are helpful in designing particularly complicated board games.

Creating a computer game takes even more resources. Computer models as a basis for games tend to be very complex. Computer games often require thousands of hours to develop and test.

Preparing simpler games takes significantly less time. Crossword puzzles, simple word games, or word search contests do not take long to develop. Brainstorming the approach to be taken or the questions to be included involves several staff people for several hours each. The MBTA prepared a crossword puzzle using clues from drawings that appeared in previous editions of the project newsletter.

Creating a contest usually involves less staff time than conceiving a board game. Staff develops a concept, define rules and parameters, decide if there will be a prize, and figures out how to publicize it. Depending on the complexity of the contest and how many entries are desired, the time commitment for staff is probably in hours or days, rather than weeks.

Larger-scale contests are much more structured and expensive. For example, a six-month-long planning and design contest called *The Electric Vehicle and the American Community* required participants to have considerable research and design skills. A consortium of private and governmental agencies challenged contestants to envision a new infrastructure for electric and hybrid vehicles. With over \$100,000 in cash prizes as an attraction, the contest drew hundreds of participants. Preparing entrance requirements, books, posters, and other materials for official entrants was a major effort. Agencies can join forces with other agencies or private-sector firms to sponsor such a contest; in such cases, preparation and evaluation efforts are distributed among all of the sponsors rather than falling heavily on the shoulders of already overworked internal staff.

How are games and contests organized?

Goals for a game or contest must be clearly established. As each concept for a game is put forth, it should be tested to see if it meets the game's overall goals.

Board or computer games require staff or consultant time for design, illustration, rule-making, printing, and distribution. Target audiences for distribution should be outlined prior to design and production of a game. Simplicity for players is key; the game should be easy to understand and play.

Contests require staff or consultant time to prepare, implement, and follow up the entries. Contests are introduced at any time in a process and are successful ways to keep interest sustained over the long haul. Follow-up is particularly important if the agency aims to generate interest and gather names for mailing lists.

Board games involving role play are often most effective early in a process, because they immediately allow participants to see issues from other points of view. This helps establish an atmosphere of open-mindedness and sets the tone for the entire process. However, games that illustrate conflicts that arise out of budget constraints or community development issues are often used to move away from a stalemate in the middle or at the end of a process.

Most games do not require players to prepare before participating, but preparation by staff and leaders is essential. Making several dry runs of a game intended for public use helps agencies anticipate problems and questions. For games designed to be played at community meetings, agencies often announce the rules and send instructions to participants in advance.

How are they used with other techniques?

Games and contests are used to broaden the thinking and understanding of people involved in the study or exploration of an issue. Board games or computer games simulate situations and urge people to view a transportation plan or project from many different vantage points. In Jefferson County, Colorado, a visioning exercise for development of the Route 285 Corridor used food and candy as elements placed on a base map to indicate participants' preferences. Licorice sticks were used for roadways, and food not used was eaten. The project was known as *Eat Your Way to the Future*.

Agencies use games and contests as ice-breakers at meetings. They supplement other techniques and enliven staid processes that rely on passive meetings. They are useful when people from different walks of life are working on a common project. The Town of Orleans, Massachusetts, used a quiz-show game format to present the results of a town-wide survey.

Games are used in mediation. In Amherst, Massachusetts, the National Association of Mediation in Education collects a variety of mediation games to deal with environmental conflicts, which are closely related to transportation situations. These games include instructions for training, leading, and playing. (See [Negotiation and Mediation](#).)

Games are included in special events such as transportation fairs. In Portland, the Oregon Metro transportation fair offered board games and computer games for children, some in a separate room with supervision so parents could participate in the fair and allow the children to play and learn. (See [Transportation Fairs](#).)

Contests are incorporated into newsletters, handouts, and other written materials. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)

What are the drawbacks?

Poorly designed games are not likely to generate usable public input. Some games do not appeal to the bulk of the desired audience. Overly complicated or detailed contests draw only those already involved or interested in the issues. If games or contests are not linked to other involvement activities or if their goals are not clear, participants are likely to feel let-down and frustrated. Games are viewed as frivolous if they are not integrated well into a total process for meaningful public involvement in planning.

If not well-designed, games fall flat. Without skillful design, the basic point of an exercise is obscured. Leaders of game sessions need to be prepared to mitigate the effects of boring games through lively discussion and follow-up.

Games and contests do not interest everyone. Certain members of the community are likely to resent their use or interpret playing games as trivializing the issues and talking down to them. This perception is avoided by making sure the game relates clearly to the situation at hand and the goals of using it are explained up front.

Games and contests are expensive in terms of staff or consultant time, because design techniques are not yet in widespread use. They take time to develop if they are to be easily understood or to generate widespread interest. Games are sometimes quite elaborate or expensive and require fancy hardware, software, or other equipment not normally available for community meetings.

Are games and contests flexible?

Games and contests are flexible in terms of type, where and when they can be used, staff time, and cost.

Games are developed for varying levels of sophistication. Most staff people are capable of developing or working with simple games, but complicated computer games or contests require specialized skills. Contests vary widely in complexity, depending on the nature of the project or plan and the issues to be addressed.

When are they used most effectively?

Used at the beginning of a process, games and contests attract attention and participation. A computer simulation modeling game was used in Hawaii to test different assumptions about energy use, the economy, and various policy decisions. The public advisory group gave input on the policy scenarios fed into the model. Games and contests help enliven or sustain interest in a plan or project. To maximize initial effort and subsequent follow-through, the MBTA publicized its new cross-town bus service and announced a six-month design contest for logos. Contest entries were displayed later on car cards in buses and trains.

For further information:

- Amtrak, Washington, D.C., (202) 906-2108
- Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism, Honolulu, Hawaii, (808) 587-3837
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 222-4487
- Missouri Highway and Transportation Department, Jefferson City, Missouri, (314) 526-3851
- National Association for Mediation in Education, Amherst, Massachusetts, (413) 545-2462
- Oregon Metro, Portland, Oregon, (503) 797-1743
- Santa Barbara Community Development, Santa Barbara, California, (510) 845-7549
- San Francisco County Transit Authority, (415) 557-6850
- Triangle Transit Authority, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, (919) 406-1710