

# CITIZEN ADVISORY GROUPS

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This *Citizen Participation Strategies for Municipal Planning in Vermont* series describes several strategies for identifying public preferences and values to influence the municipal planning process. A citizen advisory group takes that process a step further by granting some degree of decision-making power to community members, giving them a chance to guide that incorporation themselves. In fact, other citizen participation activities can often lead to the formation of a citizen advisory group. The concept and format of a citizen advisory group can be adapted to the situation at hand. The one qualifying constant is that the citizens gathered together are given the ability to impact the municipal planning process by advising the planning commission, exploring priority issues, contributing to portions of the town plan, and more. Whether charged with identifying neighborhood issues or exploring village designation, a citizen advisory group can help institutionalize citizen participation in community planning (Source: Harless, 2001.), engender agreement and ownership of the process, instill planning awareness and leadership in the community, and—like community visioning—reflect legitimacy back upon the planning commission.

## **A. Anticipated Outcomes**

A citizen advisory group is a good way to let citizens shoulder some of the burden of the municipal planning process (without shirking your duties of course). The advisory group can get the job done while incorporating citizen input every step of the way. While not as in-depth as a community-wide visioning event may be, a citizen advisory group allows your planning commission to gain insight into important preferences as determined by a sample of your community's experience and expertise. Whenever a group of people converge to discuss a planning topic, you are likely to observe community-held opinions. (See box on page 2 for a list of reasons to put a citizen advisory group together.)

## **A Quick Look**

- A. Anticipated Outcomes:** *Citizen preferences*—below
- B. Flow of Information:** *Two-way: structured*—below
- C. Scope of Work:** *Intermediate*—page 2
- D. Degree of Participant Interaction:** *Intermediate* — page 3
- E. Degree of Citizen Empowerment:** *Extensive: inclusion, partnership, or delegated power*— page 4

## **Other outcomes**

Many of the articles written on citizen advisory groups (or similar committees) reference the term *social capital* (Source: Haight & Ginger, 2000; White, 1995b.), which can be defined as the proven capacity to interact with other people and groups and access—and contribute to—community resources. One planner's words sum it up best: "the more citizens interact with one another and the government as citizens and equals, not clients, the healthier the community and stronger the government." (Source: White, 1995b.)

A final important point is that the use of citizen advisory groups can help put out any public-reaction "fires" before they start by showing that citizens were intimately involved in the planning decision at hand. (Source: Jarvis, 1995.)

## **B. Flow of Information**

Like a community visioning event, the information exchange between planners and participants in a citizen advisory group flows both ways. Unlike visioning, however, a citizen advisory group activity can be quite structured. Basically, a meeting of a citizen advisory group

should be conducted just like any other public meeting that your planning commission engages in. The burden is on both the planners and citizen leaders to provide each other with information and insight, and both groups are taking precious time out of their day to do so. Suggestions on how to run a fair and effective meeting can be found in the second factsheet in this series: *Public Meetings and Hearings*.

Normally the course of the information flow in a citizen advisory group begins with the planning commission setting the stage for the participants and ends with the participants giving recommendations, presenting a draft town plan section, etc., to the commission. Between those two points, the advisory group will be taking advantage of the expertise of its members, outside sources, and the planning commission to perform its duties. It is suggested that at least one planning commissioner or staffer be present at each advisory group meeting to ensure that the information being gathered and used is accurate and suitable from

### **Many good reasons...**

James Harless has identified many positive purposes for local environmental advisory groups. Here is a sampling of that list adapted for the use of planning advisory groups:

- to assist local planning officials in organization and evaluation
- to provide opportunities for citizens affected by planning to have a role in the process
- to develop a good public relations program and help improve citizen knowledge of planning
- to act as a sounding board for major changes
- to foster a constructive relationship between citizens and the planning commission
- to encourage thorough discussion and review
- to add to the local knowledge that already exists on the planning commission
- to develop a group of citizens with enhanced knowledge, leadership, and appreciation of planning issues
- to exploit the advantages of group thinking processes and teamwork in reaching planning decisions.

(Source: Harless 2001.)

**“What you want from your groups are clearly thought-out goals. To get that, you have to supply information that emphasizes choices and consequences.”**

(Source: White, 1996.)

a planning standpoint.

Keep in mind that, at some point, the planning commission and citizen advisory group should find a venue to share their findings, recommendations, or products with planning commission and the public at large.

### **C. Scope of Work**

You may find that most of the work involved with a citizen advisory group comes when putting it together. This first step is crucial and should not be viewed as a “quick and easy process.” (Source: Jarvis, 1995.) You should make sure to identify and include all of the primary stakeholders that you know of concerning the issue at hand. For instance, you do not want the hard work of a neighborhood planning group to be all for naught in the face of opposition from others who should have been included.

Of course, the situation at hand will dictate the focus and scope of recruitment to a citizen advisory group. Including a cross-section of the community makes the strongest case for legitimacy, and that means looking beyond those outstanding volunteers and leaders that you may immediately think of. (Source: White, 1996.) However, a neighborhood committee would lose its focus if it consisted of many members outside the neighborhood, and a group put together to write the transportation element of the town plan would flounder if it had a healthy cross-section of the community but lacked particular citizens with expertise in transportation issues. Vermont’s Northwest Regional Planning Commission recommends that you keep a list of citizens with expertise and experience in different planning elements and start there when forming an advisory group. (Source: NRPC, 2000.)

The East Montpelier Planning Commission did just

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that when they began forming an advisory committee to help draft the revisions to the town plan. The committee actually consisted of many subgroups, each charged with writing a small section of the plan. The planning commission employed a specific-to-general strategy as follows:

1. identifying those citizens they knew with experience or expertise on particular town plan elements,
2. seeking input from those volunteers on identifying additional members, and
3. advertising the effort in the local newsletter and opening membership to the general public. (Source: *Fillion, 2003*.) (See the box on page 4 for more information on the East Montpelier efforts.)

Even if an issue-based public meeting or a visioning exercise results in an “instant” citizen advisory group, opening participation up to the general public as well never hurts.

### Keeping things going

If the hardest part of organizing a citizen advisory group is putting it together, then maintaining momentum and preventing burnout comes in a close second. Here are a few suggestions:

- Make sure a planning commissioner or staffer is present at all citizen advisory meetings to keep the group focused and help it identify benchmark objectives to show progress.
- In addition to staffing group meetings, make sure that one or two of the citizen group members have

good leadership and organizational abilities to help keep the momentum going.

- Make membership a rewarding experience, during which citizens can network, learn new things, and make good contributions to the community. (Source: *Whitney & Lindell, 2000*.)
- While the use of special consultants to manage citizen advisory groups is not explored in this factsheet, it is not improbable. You may wish to look into this option.

All in all, a heavy dose of patience never hurts. (Source: *Jarvis, 1995*.) Dealing with new people and new processes will not necessarily be easy at first for the participants or even the planning commission, but leadership, clear goals, perseverance, and time will help you all make a significant contribution to community planning. (See box below left for more suggestions on putting together and managing citizen advisory groups.)

### D. Degree of Participant Interaction

Previous sections have identified the need to conduct citizen advisory group meetings with the same structure as planning commission meetings and suggested that a planning commissioner or staffer always be present to ensure that the meeting is run so all members can fairly take part and in a reasonable amount of time. The previous sections also advise the inclusion of as many stakeholders as possible and therein lies a challenge: Disagreement is bound to occur within a large and/or diverse group of people. Disagreement can actually have many positive effects in a group like this, but it can also paralyze further action if not handled well. Consider taking the following steps:

1. Find an experienced chairperson to run the meetings and follow a meeting structure that fairly lets everyone have their say.
2. Stress compromise and cooperation, not consensus. Don't discourage group-wide agreement, but don't raise people's hopes either.
2. Avoid stacking the group with people who have strong leadership skills. One or two is plenty. Any more may lead to a conflict of ego and leadership style.
3. Make sure that experts in their field are given their due, while also respecting the desires of all citizens involved in the group.

(See box on page 5 for things you can personally do at a citizen advisory group meeting to encourage effective interaction.)

### Four pieces of advice

Otis White has four basic suggestions for citizen advisory groups:

1. Find the right people: Bring on those most affected first, then those who are generally interested, and then fill in any missing areas of expertise.
2. Get the group organized: Develop a clear goal, keep members focused on choices, and highlight underlying values of the issues.
3. Give them the problem—and stand behind their decision(s) or product(s).
4. Make everyone's role clear: Maintain the focus and let the citizens make the choices.

(Source: *White, 1995b*.)

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## Group processes

It also helps to be aware of proven processes that help groups choose options and consider different viewpoints. Following is a list of suggested options for planning commissions to try:

- *Interactive Brainstorming*: Spontaneous suggestions are made, consolidated into topic areas, and rated by the group, thus identifying problems and priorities.
- *Nominal Group Process*: Each group member writes down an idea and shares and elaborates upon it with the rest of the group. Each group member gets to state his or her own opinion about each idea as well. In the end the most popular idea is voted upon.
- *The Delphi Technique*: This is a written process in which each group member fills out a questionnaire, views the combined results, and then gets to change his or her earlier response based on what he or she has learned. This process is repeated until either consensus is reached or at least until areas of disagreement are clarified and understood.
- *Devil's Advocacy*: Points of view that conflict with the majority are argued, if only for the purpose that they be fully explored before being set aside.

(Adapted from Chandler, 1999.)

## E. Degree of Citizen Empowerment

The empowering effects of a citizen advisory group are obvious; few other citizen participation strategies let citizens have such a direct and comprehensive effect on community planning. The decision-making power given to a group should be appropriate for both the situation at hand and the comfort of the planning commission. After all, the use of a citizen advisory group needs to work for everyone involved, including your commission. Here are three power-related points for you to consider when dealing with citizen advisory groups:

- Do not let arrogance develop. Make sure a citizen group seeks outside expertise in times of doubt. (Source: Harless, 2001.)
- It is possible for even the best citizen advisory group to get stuck in a limited perspective. (Source: NRPC, 2000.) Pay attention to their research process.
- “You’ll know you’ve succeeded if the citizens recommend higher goals and tougher choices than you would have made. You’ve failed if they come back saying yes to everything.”

(Source: White, 1996.)

## Citizen Advisory Event Example: East Montpelier, VT

In 2001, East Montpelier’s planning commission decided to put together a collection of citizen groups that would each get to rewrite a portion of the town plan. The commission broke the town plan into 18 topics, “bite-size chunks” of around three pages each, and identified at least one community member who had expertise with each section. Those members were invited to join in the effort and to suggest additional participants. Next, all community members were encouraged to join the group of their choice in the town’s newsletter, the Signpost.

Each of these groups was coordinated and facilitated by a member of the planning commission. The groups ranged from a membership of three people to six or seven and met in many different fashions. Some groups found it sufficient to meet once in a member’s kitchen and then continue their work via e-mail. This activity lasted for about 15 months followed by 3 months of ‘putting all of the pieces together.’ In the end, the planning commission profited with a revised town plan that contained the input of many different townspeople.

Planning Commissioner Deborah Fillion says that the process was worth the effort. The use of these citizen advisory groups did not necessarily make the town plan revision process quicker or even easier, but the commission was able to take advantage of local resources that they continue to tap, get people involved, incorporate many different perspectives, and start a process that will have a lasting impact on the community.

The revised East Montpelier town plan has yet to go up for adoption as this factsheet is being created, but Fillion says that it has caused very little disagreement or controversy so far. In the meantime, the planning commission plans to soon form another citizen advisory group: a village center committee.

(Source: Fillion, 2003.)

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## Reflecting back on the commission

Finally, the use of citizen advisory groups—just like a community visioning process—will reflect a degree of empowerment right back at your planning commission. Giving citizens their chance to join together and make a direct impact on community planning will lend your commission the legitimacy needed to do your job well and with public acceptance.

Be sure to formally recognize the efforts of all advisory group members in the media and in any acknowledgements that may accompany a planning product. Your efforts may pay off when recruitment is necessary. The members of a citizen advisory group may very well form the pool of community leaders for future appointment to the planning commission.

## Resources for Citizen Planners

### Organizations/Consultants:

Your community's Regional Planning Commission (find it at [www.vpic.info/rpcs](http://www.vpic.info/rpcs)).

Also check out the Vermont Planning Information Center at [www.vpic.info](http://www.vpic.info)

### Publications:

Consult the primary information sources for this factsheet listed under *Reference Information*.

## Encouraging interaction

Consider following these suggestions during a citizen advisory group meeting (and encouraging others to do likewise):

- Let people have their say.
- Acknowledge their feelings are valid, even when you don't share them.
- Allow people the opportunity to work out their own accommodations.

(Source: White, 1995a.)

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