

USING LOCAL MEDIA RESOURCES

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This factsheet diverges from the rest in this series in that it covers an activity that cannot accurately be called citizen participation by itself. However, the use of media resources to inform the public at large is an important tool that can support and coordinate with public involvement activities. The effective use of the media resources at your disposal—e.g., newspapers, websites, video, radio, or local newsletters—will encourage both of the following:

- healthy community involvement in citizen participation activities
- development of an informed public (in matters of planning).

In this factsheet, you will find tips and suggestions for dealing with reporters, writing press releases, deciding how to get the word out, and avoiding bad press. You are urged to put this information to use when undertaking any of the other citizen participation activities in this series.

A. Anticipated Outcomes

While there are many citizen participation activities that offer different strategies for collecting public input and opinion, any effort will benefit from an attempt by your planning commission to communicate timely and clear information through local media channels. When your commission uses local newspapers, websites, cable access facilities, and whatever else may be at hand to communicate relevant information to the public, you may find that you reap four primary benefits:

- an effective and accurate portrayal of the planning issues and activities in your community,
- informed community members (think of them as a growing volunteer pool),
- proponents and opponents of your activities who are better informed, and thus will benefit your community's planning dialogue in the end, and
- increased participation in planning meetings and activities.

A Quick Look

- A. Anticipated Outcomes:** *Informed community members*—below
- B. Flow of Information:** *One-way: planning commission to community*—below
- C. Scope of Work:** *Minimal to intermediate*—page 2
- D. Degree of Participant Interaction:** *None (depending on resource used)*—page 4
- E. Degree of Citizen Empowerment:** *None to minimal: informing*—page 6

B. Flow of Information

The very nature of this particular activity is to maintain a flow of information, mostly one-way, to the community at large. In fact, it is recommended that your planning commission always present itself as an open source of accurate information to any interested party, including reporters. Be sure to open all planning meetings and activities to the press just as much as you do other members of the public.

There may be cases when it is counterintuitive for your commission to be an open source of information. It is true that your commission and the press may have different interests, and that you may be asked to provide information that could present you and your work in an unfavorable light, but you are urged to never cover up or suppress any materials. Chances are that a resourceful reporter could somehow get the information from other sources regardless, and then your commission would have no input on the matter at all.

Your commission should view controversial information as something to be managed, not censored. If your commission does find itself in the midst of a controversy, your priorities should be to make certain of the following:

- Your side is being presented in the press coverage.
- You answer all questions factually and logically. Be direct and to the point.
- You avoid the perpetuation of personal attacks.
- You remind readers, viewers, and listeners that the primary motivation of a planning commission is the facilitation of the public good. (*Source: Essex, 2002.*)

Your commission's chances of remedying and learning from a sticky situation will increase the more you conduct yourselves with truthfulness, openness, and the willingness to work with others. You may want to identify a commission member who exhibits these qualities as the primary press contact. He or she should also be someone with the writing and

organizational skills to address the issues covered in the next section on *Scope of Work*.

Your planning commission should also have a protocol for dealing with unexpected questions. This protocol might state that any inquiry from the media, whether via a late night call or a conversation in the grocery store, should be referred to the commission chair or another designated person. Your commission should create a protocol that best suits your needs.

Explore local resources

While maintaining your commission as a source of information, you should also be constantly monitoring media activities and stories in your community. The goal is to know what is newsworthy and what media resources you have at hand. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What newspapers and newsletters are read in the community? Which planning issues are covered most often, and who are the journalists/writers covering them? In what light are these issues being presented? What are the normal deadlines to submit materials? Do they have a website? Do they publish letters to the editor?
- Does the community have an official website? Who maintains it? Is it up-to-date? What information is included on the planning commission and other municipal bodies? Would it be possible to post agendas, minutes, announcements, and contact information there?
- Is there a local radio station? Are there any local talk shows? Do they cover any planning-related issues? Would they be willing to interview someone from the commission?
- Is there local-access cable in the community? Are there any local shows where a commission member could be interviewed? Do they televise local board meetings?

Once you answer these basic questions about media resources in your community, you will know more about what options your commission has available. You will also have a better idea of media venues to use, depending upon the information you would like to communicate and/or the activity you may be preparing for.

C. Scope of Work

The work associated with using local media resources will vary depending upon the venue and situation. Posting agendas and minutes on the town website does not require much effort at all, but a press release on an

What should be in a press release

1. A newspaper-style headline in boldface or all caps and an optional blurb or "deck" underneath.
2. A contact name and phone number.
3. Your planning commission's formal name, address, fax/phone numbers, e-mail address, and website.
4. Dateline: city, state, month, day, year.
5. Date and time the information can be released.
6. An attention-grabbing opening paragraph that reads like the lead of a newspaper story, summarizing the most important information and why it matters to the community.
7. Quotes from one or two organization leaders who reinforce or explain the main points.
8. One to three paragraphs that elaborate on the lead with more details, background on preceding events, and information on what comes next.
9. A paragraph or two explaining the story, public policy, or science behind the news.
10. A boilerplate paragraph summarizing your organization's purpose, membership, relationships, and accomplishments.

Note: Try to stay within two, double-spaced letter-size pages.

(*Source: Essex, 2002.*)

upcoming community visioning process will require some thought and finesse. The focus of any effort you put into media activities should be on four variables:

- relevance
- clarity
- timeliness
- diversity

Relevance

What is newsworthy? That should be the first question to enter your commission's collective mind. "It's an event, situation, or decision that's new, different, and important, and likely to impact many people in your community," according to writer David Essex. (Source: Essex, 2002.) Reporters, especially, will not be interested in a release that only serves to show that your commission exists. The American Planning Association (APA) advises that anything new with a local angle and a human element is likely to catch the interest of the media. (Source: APA, 2003.) It is safe to say that an upcoming citizen participation activity will fit the bill—your commission should at least get a brief mention in the local paper.

Clarity

The APA recommends that your commission develop a goal for your overall communication strategy. This will be the main point of your release to the media and will govern the tone and direction of your release. (Source: APA, 2003.) If the local newspaper could only run one sentence about what your commission is setting out to do, what would you like it to say? Your answer should be the first thing you write in your release. The title should also clearly and succinctly state the situation at hand.

As a secondary priority, give background on any historical or technical aspects of your release that might not be quite clear to the media or the public. This will help prevent distortion of the story you are trying to tell. (Source: APA, 2003.) Explain the relevance to the planning process in clear, unambiguous terms and with the absence of any "plannerese." (Source: Cogan, 1998.) Be sure to identify someone as a contact in case there are any additional questions.

Timeliness

If your release concerns a decision or event that just took place, get it out as soon as possible. It may even help to prepare the release beforehand. If your release concerns an upcoming activity or event, be sure to submit it to the media well in advance—several days if possible. This will allow reporters and others

time enough to gather whatever additional information they desire for their story and schedule you for television or radio interviews. Be sure to invite the media to the event, and appoint a commission member to meet with them beforehand and answer any preliminary questions they may have. Video and audio media will benefit from facilitation by commission members or staffers in setting up any equipment they may bring with them. (Sources: Essex, 2002; Cogan, 1992.)

Diversity

There are two types of diversity to consider here. The first is the use of "extras" to help flesh out your press release. Images, charts, and other visual displays of information are good appendices to any release, as are biographical and historical materials and suggestions for additional sources. (Source: APA, 2003.) If possible, small questionnaires that can be returned by readers provide an interactive aspect to the release and may encourage readership and participation down the road. This is something to explore with newspapers and websites. (Source: Cogan, 2000.) (See box on page 2 on writing a press release.)

The second form of diversity to consider is a wide and coordinated use of media venues. If time and resources are available, your commission may want to attempt to take advantage of multiple media opportunities. For instance, a newspaper article could mention an upcoming radio interview and the presence of a website for more information. The website, in turn, could help provide background for the article and also mention the radio interview as a venue for caller input. The interview could refer back to the website

Ideas for a media blitz from a Vermont regional planner

"Ask the local paper to run a Bizzaro News insert or ask community access cable to run a *War of the Worlds* scenario. At a minimum, utilize radio PSAs (public service announcements), involve local cable, websites, and newsletters, and solicit Letters to the Editor from divergent points of view. Everyone has unique talents, make use of the variety."

(Source: Kanz, 2000.)

and to the article to show that there is a wealth of information about the upcoming activity. The commission or staffer present at the interview could also field any questions that callers may have after reading the newspaper article. (See box on page 3 for ideas for a media blitz.)

The following is a list of different media outlets that may be available in your community and some tips for using them.

Newspapers—Much of the information in this factsheet is applicable to dealing with newspaper reporters and staff. Your planning commission will gain high visibility from a newspaper article or letter to the editor. However, your commission has very little control over the content of a newspaper article. Remember to be mindful of deadlines and to make a commissioner available for further questioning. (See box below about letters to the editor.)

Tips from a regional planner

“The best examples of positive use of media I have been involved with occurred in Enosburgh and Wolcott. In both of these cases, the planning commission had just completed a significant rewriting of their town plans. During the 30 day period before the first public hearing a different planning commission member volunteered to write a letter to the editor describing what the planning commission had just done and why it was important to the town. One letter to the editor appeared in each week’s paper for the four weeks. In both of these cases between 25 and 30 people showed up to the planning commission’s public hearing.

“The message to take home here is that very few people actually read warnings for public hearings but most people read the letters to the editor. If you want people to read and get involved, remember letters to the editor. If you are looking to fill board vacancies, a letter to the editor will get more than a posting [in the classifieds].”

—Mike Miller, Lamoille County
Planning Commission, 2000

Press events—It is rare that your commission may use these, but if you do, be sure to establish the main topic and background for the event in a release beforehand. At the event, make sure that there are commissioners and staffers present to facilitate the set-up needs of the radio and television media. Speak from prepared materials, and use visual aids to complement the information you are communicating. Be open and truthful when taking questions, and identify contacts for further information.

Town website—This is a good venue for general planning commission information. Contact information, meeting times, agendas, and minutes should be posted on the website. Releases should be posted here, but will generate little readership if the website is the sole venue. A website is most useful as a resource if identified as such in another media venue. Online questionnaires are another possibility, but are very rare in Vermont communities. Regardless, be sure your commission and/or town has the staff resources to keep all website information up-to-date.

Radio or television interviews—When on the radio or TV, be sure to speak concisely yet in a friendly manner. Be ready to take caller questions. Coordinate with media staff beforehand if you would like an announcement and/or graphic sending viewers/listeners to other resources for more information. Also work closely with television crews on using visual aids. Local-access television stations may be willing to rebroadcast the interview, or rebroadcast any other video materials you produce. (See box on page 5 for an innovative example of using local video resources.)

Community newsletters—A Vermont community is more likely to have some sort of periodic newsletter rather than a full local newspaper. Newsletter staff may also be more likely to work closely with your commission on the final article and accommodate your needs and wishes. Nevertheless, the general rules of newspapers apply: be mindful of deadlines, and make your release as relevant, clear, and timely as possible. (See box on page 6 for a good example of an effective community newsletter.)

D. Degree of Participant Interaction

By now it should be clear that there is very little possibility of participant interaction concerning use of local media, unless you are engaging in a format that takes call-ins. This section, however, will cover suggestions for dealing with media staff, primarily reporters, apart from the tips that you have already read in this

factsheet. Some brief, additional advice follows.

If your planning commission is venturing into media relationships for the first time, try not to begin by sending out a press release simply announcing your existence to the community. Wait for some significant decision or event. Media staff will appreciate occasional stories of substance more than a steady stream of non-newsworthy information, and they will be more willing to work with you if your commission focuses on the former. If media staff are not responsive to the releases you do send out, give a friendly call, or pull one aside and explain to her why you think she should pay more attention to your activities. Ask her for suggestions on what your commission does that may be newsworthy, and focus any releases on that aspect. (Source: *Essex, 2002.*) In the end, you cannot force a reporter to write on a subject matter that they seem unresponsive to.

Apart from unresponsive media, your commission may find itself in a situation where a reporter has committed an error, prioritized opinion over fact, or written a story in a tone that your commission does not agree with. When dealing with such a situation, it is important to remember that a reporter's primary allegiance is to his paper (a business supported by readership), not your commission, and he may have a legitimate reason for what was done. You should never feel "betrayed" by what a reporter does. (Source: *Cogan, 1992.*) He may simply have been doing his job.

"Bad press" may be a product of simple ignorance on the reporter's end. And while your commission cannot control the professionalism and talent of a reporter, you do have the ability to make sure that she is informed. Here are steps to follow to help prevent bad press and measures to take after the fact:

Pre-emptive steps:

1. Return phone calls and other inquiries. Do not leave questions unanswered.
2. Be prepared. Make sure you provide reporters with sufficient background and technical information.
3. Do not duck controversy. As stated above, always be open and truthful.
4. Do not try to dictate a story's content or tone. It is unlikely that a reporter intends to write an unfavorable article.
5. Do alert the media to particularly favorable and significant stories.

Reacting to bad press:

1. Promptly ask for the correction of factual inaccuracies. Stick to the facts, and avoid an argument over

an article's tone.

2. Ask for an appointment with the reporter. Focus on an understanding of each of your roles for future stories.
3. Ask for an appointment with the editor/news director. Discuss an opinion piece and suggestions for future coverage.
4. Continue to practice the pre-emptive steps above. Take an unfavorable situation in stride and do not perpetuate a disagreement. (Source: *Hamilton, 1992.*)

Example of Local Media Resources: Swanton, VT Community Video

In 2000, the Swanton Historical Society and Downtown Revitalization Committee led an effort to put together a community video for the town. Funding was provided by the Orton Family Foundation, the Vermont Community Foundation, and local contributions. Over 100 community members of all ages were interviewed on the subjects of Swanton's past, present, and future. The video also included footage of a helicopter fly-over of the town.

The video has since been re-broadcast on local access cable. Ron Kilburn, president of the Swanton Historical Society, says that the video has been very useful as a planning tool and has helped ongoing downtown revitalization efforts. The video was also the catalyst for the conversion of an old town auditorium into a teen center, and it continues to be an innovative source for those desiring more information on the town. The resident interviews that were not included in the final cut of the Swanton Community Video have been included in another product, the Swanton Community Scrapbook.

In addition to re-broadcasting the video, Kilburn says that the local-access cable station has also been very helpful by taping municipal meetings and facilitating live call-in shows. Kilburn adds that all Swanton Historical Society programs are taped as a record.

(Source: *Kilburn, 2003.*)

Example of Local Media Resources: East Montpelier's *Signpost*

The Vermont town of East Montpelier has a local newsletter, the *Signpost*, which is published every two months. Each issue features articles on citizens of note, local business people, community events, vital statistics, municipal meetings and postings, and more. The local planning commission uses the newsletter to alert the community to upcoming meetings and hearings and to advertise citizen participation opportunities. In fact, the *Signpost* is a product of town planning activities from years ago. The newsletter lives on thanks to the hard work of volunteers and funding advertising, donations, and an annual auction.

(Source: *Fillion, 2003.*)

E. Degree of Citizen Empowerment

If knowledge is power, then by effectively using local media resources, your planning commission will be contributing to the empowerment of the community at large. Any information on planning issues, upcoming events, or the general activities of your commission

that is made available to the public will support community planning in some way. Whether through increased participation in planning activities or more enlightened knowledge of what your commission does, your fellow citizens will benefit from reading about, seeing, and/or hearing their planning commission at work.

Resources for Citizen Planners

Organizations/Consultants:

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

Also check out the Vermont Planning Information Center at www.vpic.info.

Publications:

Lights, Camera, Community Video: Engaging Citizens in Creating a Community Documentary and Vision, by Keith Spiegel, Eddie Gale, and Cabot Orton. Published in 2001 by the American Planning Association: Chicago, IL.

On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction, by William Zinsser. Sixth edition published in 1998 by Harper Perennial, New York, NY.

Plain English at Work: A Guide to Writing and Speaking, by Edward P. Bailey, Jr. Published in 1996 by Oxford Press, New York, NY.

Also, consult the primary information source for this factsheet listed under *Reference Information*.

Reference Information

Primary information sources for this factsheet:

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