

# INTRODUCTION

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**C**itizen Participation Strategies for Municipal Planning in Vermont is a collection of factsheets covering several citizen participation tools and techniques for use by Vermont's municipal planning commissions. If you are reading this, chances are one or both of the following are occurring:

- You are interested in learning what benefits citizen participation can lend to the municipal planning process.
- You are wondering how you can create citizen participation activities in your town, city, or village.

This introduction will address the first point, and the subsequent factsheets will provide insight on different citizen participation strategies to use.

## What is Citizen Participation?

This series defines citizen participation as any activity specifically designed to accomplish at least two of the following three objectives:

1. Inform the public at large of planning issues.
2. Collect input from community members.
3. Allow citizens to take part in deciding planning priorities and/or making planning decisions.

Your commission can use an array of different tools and techniques to accomplish these objectives, depending on your needs and available resources. The following factsheets list some of these techniques and describe them in terms of what typical outcomes are, how much work is involved, how much power is given to citizens, etc. Each technique has been field-tested in Vermont by people like you and some of their comments are included in the factsheets. For more information, read about the "Quick Look" feature in the section on "Using These Factsheets."

## Why Citizen Participation?

Community planning can profit from citizen participation in many ways. Here is a brief list of reasons:

1. Public involvement in the political process is the democratic ideal that this country was built upon.

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2. Citizen participation is legally required—both your planning commission and your town's legislative body are required to hold at least one public hearing, each, to adopt a new town plan or town plan revisions.
3. Citizen participation lends legitimacy to your planning work. The public will see that you have attempted to incorporate their concerns. Any power that you give to citizens will reflect reciprocal benefits back to your planning commission.
4. Involving the public in the planning process allows your planning commission to capitalize on different areas of experience and expertise in the community.
5. Citizen participation ensures the flow of fresh ideas into your work, and will keep your commission from getting "stuck in a rut."
6. Citizen participation activities often inspire beneficial community improvements and initiatives.
7. Public involvement will benefit the town by maintaining community networks and connections.
8. Action is part of this equation; public involvement helps produce the momentum behind implementation activities.

## Using These Factsheets

This series includes factsheets on five different citizen participation techniques:

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- Public Meetings and Hearings
  - Community Planning Surveys
  - Community Visioning Events
  - Citizen Advisory Groups
  - Using Local Media Resources

Each factsheet consists of four primary features:

- 1. Basic Information** from planning literature and experiences in Vermont. This is contained in the main body of each factsheet and in boxes, which highlight special tips.
- 2. Examples** of the techniques being used in Vermont by other planning commissions. These are also contained within the boxes.
- 3. The A Quick Look feature**, which quickly describes each technique based on five factors to help your commission choose which will best suit your present citizen participation needs:
  - *Anticipated Outcomes* describes what your planning commission can expect to take away from the technique, be it the preferences that people feel individually or the underlying community values that help explain why citizens feel the way they do.
  - *Flow of Information*: Does your planning commission wish to share information with the community, absorb citizen input, or a combination of both? This item will quickly let your commission know whether information flows one way or back and forth—and how structured the exchange is.

- *Scope of Work* covers the nitty-gritty details of the work and costs involved in using the technique. Each technique is rated relative to the others as requiring a minimal, intermediate, or extensive amount of work and resources.
  - *Participant Interaction*: One aspect often overlooked when planning for citizen participation is how much you will expect people to share with each other and the commission. This value is given in relation to the other techniques: none, minimal, intermediate, or extensive.
  - *Citizen Empowerment* comments on the power that is given to citizens both in terms of the activity as well as community planning overall. The techniques are given ratings of none, minimal, intermediate, or extensive (in relation to each other) and different types of empowerment are described: informing, consultation, inclusion, partnership, or delegated power.
- 4. The Resources for Citizen Planners section** at the end of each handout, which lists publications, organizations, and consultants for your planning commission to refer to for more information.

## Enjoy!

Please read these handouts, and share them with the rest of your commission and other community members. They will prove helpful in planning the citizen participation activities surrounding your next municipal plan revision or any other planning issue.

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Creation of the *Citizen Participation Strategies for Municipal Planning in Vermont* series would not have been possible without the support of and collaboration with the following:

- Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Vermont, [www.uvm.edu/envnr](http://www.uvm.edu/envnr)
- The *Planning Commissioners Journal*, [www.plannersweb.com](http://www.plannersweb.com)
- Vermont Association of of Planning and Development Agencies, [www.vpic.info/rpcs](http://www.vpic.info/rpcs)

This series is partially funded by a CSREES (Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service) grant secured through the efforts of Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy and his staff.

For information on copies or updates of this factsheet and others in the *Citizen Participation Strategies for Municipal Planning in Vermont* series, contact the University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies.

The Center for Rural Studies is a non-profit research organization that addresses social, economic, and resource-based problems of rural people and communities. The Center is based at the University of Vermont, where it is allied with the department of Community Development and Applied Economics, the Master of Public Administration program, and University of Vermont Extension.

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August 2004

FS 176: 1

Editing and design by Communication and Technology Resources, University of Vermont Extension

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. University of Vermont Extension, Burlington, Vermont. UVM Extension and U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating, offer education and employment to everyone without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status.