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Critical Factors for Enhancing Municipal Public Hearings

Although public hearings are the most common form of citizen input, they often fail to achieve their objectives. This nationwide survey of city administrators identifies factors that contribute most to successful public hearings. The most successful hearings have (1) a greater number of prehearing educational methods, (2) more media types and greater media frequency in the formal presentation, (3) more control over speakers' presentation time, (4) greater use of open follow-up meetings, and (5) more use of newspaper and direct mail to communicate posthearing decisions to the public. The qualitative data reveal city managers' 10 critical factors that are essential to the success of public hearings: effectively notifying and educating the public before the hearing; carefully planning the meeting; giving a clear, media-rich presentation of the issues; properly facilitating the meeting; and conducting appropriate follow-up.

Public participation has long been a fundamental element of local and national governmental processes in the United States. Conceptually, public participation empowers citizens to influence government actions through various means of involvement. Burby (2003, 35) summarizes four arguments for citizen involvement that go beyond the obvious goal of producing better decisions:

1. The principle of fairness or equity.
2. The right of citizens to be informed and to express their views on governmental decisions.
3. The need to represent the interests of disadvantaged and powerless groups.
4. The need to capture the insights of citizens.

Burby states that citizen involvement can "generate information, understanding, and agreement on problems and ways of solving them. It can give stakeholders a sense of ownership ... and ease the formation of coalitions who will work hard for their realization." Burby's empirical research on municipal planning shows that citizen involvement in the municipal planning process does indeed result in better plans and greater public acceptance of those plans, and it reduces the likelihood that latent opposition groups will arise unexpectedly at the last moment. King, Feltey,

and Susel cite a "growing recognition on the part of administrators that decision making without public participation is ineffective" (1998, 319), and Young's article on political activism summarizes a number of governmental entities that have recently undertaken proactive measures to increase public participation in their decision making (2001, 677-79).

The public participation literature identifies at least six useful standards for evaluating public input methods (Crosby, Kelly, and Schaefer 1986, 171; Fiorino 1990, 229; Lowndes et al. 1998, 43; Rowe and Frewer 2000, 11-16; Smith, Nell, and Prystupa 1997, 143):

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- Participants should be representative of the broad public.
- Proceedings should be fair, cost-effective, and flexible.
- Proceedings should increase the public's understanding.
- Proceedings should enable citizen participation and influence in discussion and decision making.
- Proceedings should promote improved decision making.
- The public should have at least some degree of satisfaction with the outcome, resulting in subsequent sustained public participation.

Although public participation makes good theoretical sense, many problems are encountered in actual practice. Participants in research conducted by King, Feltey, and Susel (1998, 320) indicated they agreed with the concept of public participation, but found the way it is currently practiced and framed problematic. Further, confrontational relationships may occur because many citizens feel they cannot trust the government (Pew Research Center 2000). Additional reasons relate to the attitudes of public officials. Walters, Aydelotte, and Miller (2000, 349–50) summarize six reasons for these attitudes:

1. Today's problems are too complex for the lay public to comprehend.
2. Democratic decision making is irrational.
3. The public is either disinterested or self-serving.
4. Democratic decision making and rational decision making have different goals.
5. Officials don't want to share power in making decisions.
6. Citizen participation means slower, more expensive, more complicated, and more emotionally draining processes.

In Great Britain, Lowndes et al. (1998, 17) cite a growing interest in more innovative public participation techniques, although traditional methods (such as public meetings) are still the dominant method. The same can be said of the United States: Public administrators have expressed an interest in alternative participation methods, but public hearings are still the most pervasive form of public participation (Fiorino 1990, 228). Hearings are mandated by law in most states and in many communities across the country, and Nalbandian (1999, 189) suggests that public hearings, discussions, deliberations, and other means of fostering citizen participation are important ways for municipal managers to strengthen needed community-building efforts.

In spite of the widespread use of public hearings, relatively little research has been conducted to refine this communication event. Our research attempts to address that void. This article, based on nationwide survey research, offers guidelines that can help public managers to maximize the potential of this widely used communication genre. We first review the public hearing literature and describe the study design, and then we analyze and discuss the survey's qualitative and quantitative data.

Public Hearing Literature

Despite their popularity, public hearings often fail to achieve their intended goals, frustrating both agencies and communities. After analyzing various public participation methods, King, Feltey, and Susel (1998, 323) concluded that "the most ineffective technique is the public hearing." One reason is that administrators may comply minimally with laws requiring a public hearing, simply going through the motions without real intent (Burby 2003, 36). Walters, Aydelotte, and Miller (2000, 357) point out, however, that laws requiring public hearings are usually only minimum standards, and additional input methods can be used to great advantage. For example, if a law requires hearings, public administrators can employ other input methods earlier in the decision process. Regarding balancing the need for public input and the need for technical input on difficult decisions, Thomas (1995, 93) states that decision makers should seek *more* public input when acceptance of a decision is more important and *less* public input when technical knowledge is more important.

Additional problems are that hearings are sometimes held at difficult times and locations and too late in the decision-making process. The public hearing is "ineffective and conflictual, and it happens too late in the process.... Therefore, rather than cooperating to decide how best to address issues, citizens are reactive and judgmental, often sabotaging administrators' best efforts" (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998, 320). Middendorf and Busch (1997, 50) point out that public hearing communication is often one way—a monologue rather than a dialogue—and input from the public is too tightly controlled. Lowndes et al. (1998, 83) cite a lack of awareness about participation opportunities as a limitation. Another problem is that many hearings attract very small crowds, perhaps because of citizens' lack of trust in government officials and assumptions their input does not make a difference—for example, a belief that the government does not truly care what people think (Ebdon 2002, 289).

Adding to this credibility problem is citizens' lack of interest concerning public issues (Davis 2000, 43). Attracting and involving younger citizens and ethnic minorities has also proven to be challenging (Lowndes et al. 1998, 47). Midden's (1995, 316) research in Europe identified participation differences on the bases of gender (more men than women participate), age (less involvement by the very young and the very old), education (more participation by the well educated), and political persuasion (overrepresentation by left-wing citizens). Even on critical health-related issues that were widely publicized by government or by private firms, Golding, Krimsky, and Plough (1992, 32) concluded that citizens didn't participate because they were alienated by "media sensationalism," as well as by mitigation companies (firms whose services help clients mini-

mize risk or achieve compliance) out to make a fast buck. Government officials thus face a media dilemma—on the one hand trying to communicate in an objective and nonsensational way, while on the other hand trying to highlight the critical nature of the subject to build public interest (Chipman et al. 1996, 138).

Although the literature highlights numerous challenges facing administrators as they attempt to hold effective public hearings, this meeting format continues to be the most pervasive type of public participation method. Thus, research is needed to identify best practices and to assist administrators in improving the effectiveness of their public hearings.

Study Design

This research study employed survey methodology to study public hearings in U.S. cities with populations of 25,000 to 99,999. The membership database of the International City/County Management Association, the nation's largest local public management organization, included 1,031 cities in this population range. From this list of cities, we used systematic random sampling to select 500 cities for inclusion in the study. After numbering the managers of these cities from 1 to 500, we sent the 250 odd-numbered managers a questionnaire asking about the *most*-successful recent public hearing in their community, and we sent the 250 even-numbered managers a questionnaire relating to their recent *least*-successful public hearing. Our study examined city managers' perceptions of success; we did not survey citizens who attended the hearings. However, as our results show, these city managers' definitions of success reflect balanced sensitivity to citizen and government concerns.

The survey instrument was first pilot tested with city managers and then refined and prepared for mailing. The final questionnaire contained one open (qualitative) question and 14 closed (quantitative) questions. The open question asked the respondents to list the three most significant factors they felt had contributed to the success of their most-successful public hearings or to the failure of their least-successful public hearings. The closed questions requested information on more detailed aspects of the hearings. Two mailings of the questionnaire generated 256 usable responses, a 51.2 percent return rate. Forty-six of the 50 United States were represented in the responses. Of the 256 city managers who responded, 121 (47.3 percent) answered a questionnaire focusing on their least-successful hearing; 135 (52.7 percent) responded to the questionnaire

regarding their most-successful hearing.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

The city managers were asked to consider all of the public hearings in which they had participated and to indicate three factors that contributed most to the success or failure of those public hearings. Respondents focused on either success or failure factors according to the group in which they were placed. To process the qualitative data, we individually read the detailed responses and inductively developed a list of categories into which all of the comments could be classified. We then compared our individual results and consolidated them into a final category list. Using the final list, we classified all of the comments, eliminating items with a frequency of 10 or less. Table 1 shows the final 10 critical factors, along with their frequencies ($n = 477$) and rankings.

Table 1 Factors Contributing to the Success or Failure of Public Hearings

Phase	Rank	N	Success/failure factors
Prehearing	7	37	—Good planning (clear goals, good timing, accessible location, prepared officials, reports, procedures, and agenda)/poor planning (vague goals, poor timing, poor location, unprepared people, reports, procedures, and agenda)
	6	42	—Effective notification/ineffective notification
	4	49	—High public interest in topic/limited public interest in topic
	3	69	—Effective prehearing education (including refuting false information)/inadequate prehearing education
Hearing	1	73	—Good meeting conductor, facilitator/ineffective meeting conductor, facilitator
	2	71	—Clear, complete presentation at beginning of the hearing, with visual aids, graphics, handout materials/unclear, incomplete message at beginning of hearing, with inadequate handouts and graphics
	5	43	—Adequate opportunity for public input/inadequate time or opportunity for public input
	8	35	—Open, receptive attitude of city officials/closed, unreceptive attitude of city officials
	10	26	—Open-minded citizens/narrow-minded, emotionally charged citizens who are unwilling to listen or talk rationally
Posthearing	9	32	—Effective action and follow up on citizens' input/untimely, inadequate action and follow-up on citizens' input

Analysis of Quantitative Data

The quantitative data came from city managers' reflections on one recent public hearing their city had held. The managers answered according to the "successful" or "unsuccessful" perspective they had been assigned. We analyzed these data to determine whether any public hearing planning or execution factors correlated with managers' perceived success. Only five of the closed questions generated statistically significant differences between more- and less-successful hearings (see table 2). Specifically, more successful hearings had (1) a greater number and mix of prehearing educational methods, (2) more media types and greater media frequency used in the informational presentation, (3) more control over speakers' presentation time,

(4) greater usage of an open follow-up meeting, and (5) more use of newspaper and direct mail to communicate posthearing decisions to the public. Detailed analyses of the quantitative data follow.

Table 2 Statistical Results of Quantitative Data Analysis

	Most successful	Least successful
Prehearing		
Notification methods	NS*	NS
Education	More methods	Fewer methods
Location	NS	NS
Hearing		
Topic		
Format		
Communication media	More media used	Fewer media used
Audience management	More speaker control	Less speaker control
Ratio of presenter/audience input	NS	NS
Length of hearing	NS	NS
Participation by public officials	NS	NS
Posthearing		
Open follow-up meeting	Yes	No
Number of media used in communicating final decision	More media	Fewer media

*NS = No statistically significant difference at the .05 level of confidence.

Prehearing Factors

We gathered information about three prehearing factors: notification, education, and location.

Notification Methods and Media. Cities employed an average of three notification methods to advertise public hearings, and the ranking was the same for most- and least-successful public hearings. The following methods were used: newspaper, 97 percent; direct mail, 51.2 percent; posted public notices, 48.8 percent; television, 34.8 percent; and Web sites, 28.5 percent. Oral announcements, community organizations, and radio announcements all had frequencies of less than 25 percent. Analyzing most- and least-successful public hearing data, we found no significant difference in either the total number of methods used or the mix of methods.

Educational Methods. Our next question went beyond mere notification and focused on how the cities educated citizens about public hearing issues. Table 3 shows no significant difference in the mix of methods used, but it indicates a consistent and statistically significant difference in the total number of methods used ($p = .019$), meaning that

Table 3 Methods and Media Used to Educate the Public

Method	Most	Least	Overall	p value
Newspaper	70.4	65.3	68.0	.384
Direct mail	43.0	35.5	39.5	.225
Oral presentations	42.2	31.4	37.1	.074
Television	25.9	19.8	23.0	.248
Documents in public places	23.0	19.8	21.5	.543
Web site	20.0	14.0	17.2	.208
Radio	11.1	9.1	10.2	.593
Other	17.0	14.0	15.6	.511
Number of methods used	2.32	2.09		.019

the most-successful hearings were accompanied by a greater number of educational methods than were the least-successful hearings. Although this finding does not prove a causal relationship between educational efforts and meeting success, it does suggest the possibility of such a relationship. Providing better prehearing education enables the audience to be more well informed about the hearing.

Location of Hearings. The overwhelming majority of the hearings were held in a city or county building (93 percent of the least-successful and 89 percent of the most-successful hearings were held in these facilities). The difference between the most- and least-successful public hearings was not statistically significant ($p = .666$). Because the large majority of hearings were held in city or county buildings, this study was unable to analyze the effect of holding hearings in other locations. Additional research is needed to analyze the impact of location on public hearing participation.

Hearing Factors

Seven survey questions dealt with the actual hearing, including the (1) meeting topic, (2) meeting format, (3) communication media used, (4) audience management, (5) meeting structure, (6) length of hearing, and (7) participation by elected and appointed city officials.

Topic of Hearing. Regarding the topic of the public hearing that each manager used as the basis for answering the questionnaire, our analysis showed no statistically significant difference between the most- and least-successful hearings. Thus, the public hearing topic does not appear to be a good predictor of success or failure. Zoning changes, land development, and budget matters constituted about three-fourths of all of the public hearings—72.5 percent for the most successful and 74.2 for the least successful. Other hearing types mentioned by at least 5 percent of the respondents included land-use changes; roads, streets, parking; and water and utility issues.

Meeting Format. Respondents indicated great similarity in how the most- and least-successful public hearings were structured. Overall, 90 percent of the hearings employed an initial presentation to a large group, followed by an opportunity for the audience to give input and ask questions. Thus, we found no statistically significant difference in the structure of the most- and least-successful public hearings ($p = .135$).

Communication Media. Cities used a variety of technologies in their presentations to the public. Table 4 shows that charts, maps, and handouts were used by more than 50 percent of the cities. Compared with the least-successful hearings, the most-successful hearings used a greater number of communication media ($p = .008$), with statistically significant differences for photographs ($p = .026$) and

projected noncomputerized media, such as slides and video ($p = .004$). Although the current study did not determine how such usage actually affected hearing success, the greater media richness in the most successful hearings may have contributed to greater message clarity by capitalizing on the audiences' visual and aural senses.

Table 4 Usage of Communication Media

Technology	Most	Least	Overall	p value
Charts	71.1	64.5	68.0	.255
Maps	70.4	64.5	67.6	.313
Handouts	61.5	57.0	59.4	.469
Reports and position papers	51.9	38.0	45.3	.026*
Photographs	51.9	44.6	48.4	.248
Computerized media	40.0	31.4	35.9	.152
Lecture	32.6	28.9	30.9	.526
Noncomputerized media	34.1	18.2	26.6	.004*
3D models	6.7	5.0	5.9	.561
Other	5.9	3.3	4.7	.322

* $p < .05$.

Audience Management. In the least-successful hearings, 51.3 percent employed a time limit on each person's input; 46.9 percent allowed each individual to speak as long as desired. Conversely, 61 percent of the most-successful hearings employed a time limit on audience input; only 34.7 percent allowed individuals to speak as long as desired. The difference between the least- and most-successful hearings was statistically significant ($p = .031$), with the most-successful hearings exerting more control over audience members' speaking time. Given the heightened emotions in many public hearings, audience management appears to be an important factor.

Meeting Structure. This study analyzed the ratio of municipal and audience input. Overall, municipal presenters occupied the floor most of the time in the first quarter of the meeting, the audience occupied the majority of the time in the second and third quarters of the meeting, and the presenter and audience shared meeting time relatively equally during the fourth quarter. Thus, the meetings became more interactive as time passed. No statistically significant differences between the least- and most-successful meetings were found (p values for the four quarters were .619, .604, .563, and .150, respectively).

Length of Hearing. Our statistics revealed that the length of public hearings varied widely, probably because of the issues being discussed or the audience-management methods used. Overall, roughly one-third of the meetings lasted less than one hour; another one-third lasted one to two hours. Only about 10 percent lasted more than three hours. We found no statistically significant difference in length between the most- and least-successful hearings ($p = .668$).

Participation by Elected and Appointed Officials. Survey responses indicated that approximately a dozen city officials attended the hearings, with slightly more elected

than appointed city officials attending. The difference in attendance of elected officials between the most- and least-successful hearings, however, was not statistically significant ($p = .307$). An average of 6.65 elected and 5.43 appointed representatives attended the most-successful meetings; an average of 6.38 elected and 4.23 appointed officials attended the least-successful hearings. The p values for elected and appointed officials were .448 and .092, respectively.

Posthearing Factors

We questioned city managers about two posthearing factors: (1) what follow-up actions were taken after the hearing, and (2) how city officials communicated their final decisions to the public.

Follow-up Actions. Citizens obviously want public officials to consider their input seriously. Therefore, we gathered information about follow-up actions taken after the public hearing. Table 5 shows the actions taken, with more than 90 percent of the respondents indicating some type of follow-up action. Compared with the profile of the least-successful hearings, the most-successful hearings showed a higher percentage of open follow-up meetings ($p = .032$).

Table 5 Follow-up Action Taken on Audience Input

Action Taken	Most	Least	Overall	p value
Took no action	6.7	10.7	8.6	.245
Reviewed in closed meeting	8.9	5.0	7.0	.219
Reviewed in open meeting	36.3	24.0	30.5	.032*
Reviewed by individuals outside of meetings	55.6	43.8	50.0	.060
Other	17.8	17.4	17.6	.929

* $p < .05$.

Communication of Final Decisions to the Public. After the public hearings, final decisions were communicated to the public in a variety of ways (see table 6). Compared with the least-successful hearings, the most-successful hearings employed significantly more city-authored newspaper articles ($p = .017$), independently authored newspaper articles ($p = .038$), and direct mail ($p = .000$).

Table 6 Methods Used to Communicate Final Decisions to the Public

Method	Most	Least	Overall	p value
Newspaper (city-authored)	34.1	20.7	27.7	.017*
Newspaper (independent)	74.8	62.8	69.1	.038*
Radio	14.8	16.5	15.6	.706
Television	30.4	30.6	30.5	.971
Public notices	9.6	10.7	10.2	.768
Direct mail	27.4	9.1	18.8	.000*
Web site	19.3	16.5	18.0	.570
Oral announcements	15.6	17.4	16.4	.698
Other	17.0	10.7	14.1	.148

Discussion

The city managers participating in this study identified 10 factors that exert a critical influence on public hearings. First, the prehearing elements emphasize planning and the important, but difficult, tasks of notifying and educating the public and building interest in the issue to be discussed at the public hearing. Also important is the need to orient officials, prepare information, and develop procedures. Second, the hearing factors highlight the crucial initial presentation and the skillful facilitation of audience input. Further, adequate time must be provided for individuals' comments, but the facilitator also must effectively carry out crowd control and manage people's emotions. Third, effective follow-up is essential to inform citizens of the city officials' final decisions. The following sections discuss the research findings and offer prescriptive guidelines for improving public hearings.

Prehearing Factors

The first critical prehearing factor reflects the importance of planning, including clarifying goals, deciding when and where to hold the hearing, orienting city officials, developing an effective agenda and procedures, and preparing effective written and oral reports. Typical negative responses from surveyed city managers concerning the lack of meeting preparation included "staff reports not complete," "poor preparation by staff and presenter," "lack of understanding of facts by elected officials," and "inadequate research on overall effect of proposed issue."

Concerning goals, officials need to decide whether the purpose of the hearing is primarily to inform or to invite public comment that can influence their decision. Walters, Aydelotte, and Miller state, "It is crucial to the success of citizen involvement that decision makers determine in advance how the results will be used" (2000, 354). This study highlights the fact that public hearings should be just one part of an overall public participation strategy. Our literature review reveals that probably the most frequently cited criticisms of public hearings relate to when they are held in the decision-making process (timing) and how the public input is utilized (impact). Consequently, public hearings often become a combative encounter. Citizens become frustrated because they want to influence the outcome, whereas government wants only decision acceptance. If citizen stakeholders are appropriately involved from the problem definition through the decision, the decision often will be better and citizen buy-in will be greater.

Everyone involved in planning and executing the hearing needs a solid knowledge of all of the relevant issues and facts. The person giving the initial presentation must be especially prepared to launch the meeting and give the presentation. How an issue is framed is critical. Procedural

matters also must be well planned to ensure that hearings run smoothly. For example, how will citizen input be managed and captured? Will everyone meet in large groups or break into small groups? Finally, officials may need to be reminded to keep an open and receptive mind.

Of the four prehearing factors cited as critical, three pertain to difficult task of getting people to attend. Obviously, if few people attend, a public hearing cannot obtain broad public input, a critical factor in effective public participation. Regarding attendance problems, survey respondents cited "lack of interest," "lack of interest: no tax increase, no public [attendance]," and "insufficient press coverage." King, Feltey, and Susel (1998, 322) emphasize that it is especially difficult to get younger people to public hearings. Two other comments provide possible causes of attendance problems. The first, a positive comment about public officials, states that the "public [does have] faith in good government decisions," suggesting that some citizens feel their input would not improve decision quality. The second comment reflects negatively on public officials: "Participants feel [the] decision has already been made [and that] their input will not matter." Holding meetings earlier in the process, as previously stated, would help to overcome this problem. In addition, public officials must work to build trust during every interaction with the public (Frewer et al. 1996, 484). They must solicit, listen to, and genuinely act on public input, demonstrating that this input is valued and does indeed make a difference. British research shows that citizens were most likely to participate in "issues that mattered." The list included such problems as the environment, crime, housing, and health issues (Lowndes et al. 1998, 71). Other research also shows that people who stand to gain or lose from proposed governmental programs often will become more involved (Balla 2000, 636).

Prehearing communication relies almost completely on the effective use of media, such as newsletters, newspapers, public notices, radio, television, and the Internet. Research by the Pew Research Center (1998) shows changes in readership trends for newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet, with Internet usage up and nightly network news down. Print audiences seem to be holding steady. Studies reveal a positive correlation between mass communication's coverage of a public issue and public awareness and opinion (McCombs, 1997, 437; Sei-Hill, Scheufele, and Shanahan 2002, 7). Thus, municipalities should work closely with the media to get good coverage of the issues. However, because all of these media may be ignored by the citizenry, cities have an ongoing challenge to get people to notice, read, and respond appropriately to the messages.

Cities also should consider using multiple public participation methods and approach public participation from

a strategic standpoint, rather than considering any one method or agency in isolation (Walters, Aydelotte, and Miller 2000, 357). Lando (2003, 80) states that local governmental decisions fall into two categories: (1) those that provide basic municipal direction and have a large impact on citizens, and (2) those that are largely irrelevant to citizens in general. Public hearings that are used mainly to disseminate information are more effective for the latter purpose; hearings that capture citizen input to influence decisions are more appropriate for the former.

For maximum effectiveness, city administrators should employ a multifaceted approach to media and communication. Research by McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy (1999, 329) included a study of the impact of newspaper, television, and interpersonal discussion on a person's likelihood of involvement in a civic forum. Their findings suggest that television seems to make people aware of a public issue but gives limited details about the issue. For more information, citizens then often turn to newspapers. Of the three factors studied, however, interpersonal discussion of an issue was most highly correlated with a person's actual participation in a civic forum. British research recommends that public officials work through both informal and formal leaders and actively recruit participants rather than wait for citizens to come forward (Lowndes et al. 1998, 73). Neighborhood groups can be tremendously influential at the interpersonal discussion level. Carson (1999, 40) highlights the benefits that ordinary telephone calls from city hall can provide. Citing the use of phone calls to citizens as a form of "deliberative democracy," Carson observes that she is "constantly surprised by the extent to which people ... divulge quite personal information to a stranger over the phone."

Nearly all of the public hearings reported in this study were held in a municipal building rather than a more geographically distributed format. King, Feltey, and Susel (1998, 323) emphasize that distributing meeting locations can help, such as holding hearings in elementary schools throughout the city rather than requiring everyone to come to city hall. As Young reminds us, "Even when a series of public hearings are announced for an issue, people who might wish to speak at them need to know about them, be able to arrange their work and child care schedule to be able to attend, be able to get to them, and have enough understanding of the hearing process to participate. Each of these abilities is unevenly present among members of a society" (2001, 681). Taking hearings to the citizens helps to address this area of inequality in our society.

In spite of the best efforts by public officials, however, Davis (2000, 43) suggests that most of the population, because they are less politically interested, will refuse to take an active interest in public issues, regardless of what information is provided or how it is provided to them.

Further, Davis states that the majority of American adults don't watch television news regularly, nor do they read newspapers daily—and those who do read newspapers do so mainly for nonpolitical news. If Davis's assertions are true, it appears that public officials must simply do the best they can, using multiple notification methods and multiple strategies and realizing there is no magic solution to the problem.

Along with effective notification, cities must also educate the public during the prehearing phase, including combating false information. Reporting on how a lack of good prehearing education affects public hearings, city managers commented, "the majority of residents were ignorant," "incomplete information available," and "misinformation distributed by interest groups prior to meeting." To combat these problems, cities can use a variety of methods including articles in newspapers and newsletters, explanations on the city's Web site, presentations at neighborhood groups and other public meetings, and public service announcements aired on public radio and television.

There was a statistically significant, positive relationship between the richness of the media mix and public hearing success. Thus, cities should cultivate a positive relationship with local mass media. Several studies highlight the major agenda-setting role that newspapers play. Thus, newspapers should be used to both notify and educate the public. Also, to overcome the frequent problem of subject complexity (Ebdon 2002, 289), municipalities must learn to effectively communicate in the language of lay persons. How an issue is framed is critical in informing and educating the public, both before and during public hearings.

Hearing Factors

Unlike the mediated communications with the public during the prehearing phase, communication during the actual hearing is face to face and involves all of the dynamics of human interaction: spoken messages, nonverbal messages, listening, human emotions, defensiveness, turf protection, individual agendas, and more. Table 1 reveals that the two most frequently mentioned critical success factors at this phase are giving a good initial presentation and facilitating the communication exchange effectively.

Selecting an effective presenter is critical in launching the meeting and laying the groundwork for the meeting. Regarding the initial presentation, numerous city managers mentioned poor presentations as a major cause of public hearing failure: "poor presentation," "not preparing and presenting a thorough, understandable outline of the issues to be discussed," and "not enough graphics, visual aids, etc." Often the person who knows the most about the issue is not the best person to present. This person may have poor communication skills, may be too close to the

subject to be objective, or may be unable to articulate technical topics to a lay public. It is vital for the presenter to be able to frame the issue from the public's point of view and to clearly communicate technical information in lay terms. Rehearsing the presentation in front of a pilot audience can refine the presenter's delivery.

Commenting on critical factors helping to achieve success, many city managers made comments such as "having good, simple-to-understand information to hand out" and "good staff presentations; e.g., written, PowerPoint, handouts, drawings." An oral presentation with no accompanying visuals is difficult for an audience to follow, especially for technical, complex subject matter. Providing information that can be seen and not just heard can be a tremendous help. Examples include printed executive summaries and PowerPoint slides, but even these can be used ineffectively if they aren't well designed. For example, many presenters use too many bulleted text slides with no visual augmentation. Photographs, line drawings, process charts, and visual models can greatly enrich the clarity and visual appeal.

City managers also point out the importance of clarifying the purpose to the participants. If participants don't understand the purpose, they will infer their own. One administrator stated, "The first step is to make it clear that you're going to be receptive to their comments. But also ... a critical second step to maintaining their trust is to demonstrate to them that they're being heard" (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998, 320).

Following the initial presentation, meeting facilitation becomes critical. In fact, facilitation was the most frequently mentioned factor contributing to the success or failure of public hearings. City managers commented on "lack of leadership in running meetings," "lack of capabilities of [the] person chairing the hearing," and "failure of chair to control [the] meeting." Effectively facilitating the discussion and sensitively managing audience emotion require the meeting conductor to have highly polished human and communication skills. Facilitators must be incredibly patient and thick-skinned. As Nalbandian points out, "facilitative work is not designed to 'make people feel better.' It is designed to help promote a problem-solving orientation and to develop consensus among diverse interests" (1999, 195). Crewson and Fisher (1997, 384) also emphasize the importance of learning these critical interpersonal and community-building skills for today's public managers.

Respondents identified two frequent problems exhibited by hearing facilitators: failure to manage time and failure to manage audience emotions. Typical respondent comments were as follows:

Time management:

- "Weak chair's failure to move agenda along"

- "Too much repetition of statements by audience"
- "Unlimited public input"
- "Lack of fair way to control speaking time"

Emotion management:

- "Disruption by a small minority"
- "Failure of both sides to respect the others' point of view"
- "Inability of elected officials to control audience"

Bryson and Anderson (2000, 144–45) state that for large-group planning and implementation meetings, the facilitator should be more of a process expert than a content expert. Table 1 cites three critical factors the facilitator must address. First, provide adequate time for citizen comments, which is a central reason for hearings in the first place. The meeting, however, should not drag. Obviously, citizens want to fully disclose their comments and feelings, but uncontrolled input by a few long-winded individuals can monopolize the time, resulting in limited or no opportunity for others and long meetings that generate feelings of frustration. To manage time well, the facilitator can place time limits on citizens' comments and stick to the time limit. As our study discovered, there was a statistically significant relationship between limiting the length of participants' comments and perceived hearing success. One way to effectively manage public input with large crowds is to break them into smaller groups, each managed by a separate facilitator, and give individuals longer periods of time for comment. As one city manager commented, "Small groups work well."

Second, the facilitator must control citizen emotions, keeping the comments focused on the topic and preventing angry outbursts. To assist in controlling emotion, the facilitator may reply by paraphrasing comments to assure speakers their comments were understood. Perhaps the most underutilized technique in information-gathering or problem-solving meetings is to capture and display participants' comments on a large display device such as a chalk board, computer projection screen, or flip chart. Although most cities captured citizen input with a tape recorder (81 percent) or a legal secretary (27 percent), citizens cannot "see" their comments, contributing to the tendency of most people to keep stating and restating their points to ensure they have been understood. Publicly displaying citizen comments can achieve several key benefits. This technique (1) records citizen comments for later use, (2) helps to clarify critical concerns, (3) validates citizens and their concerns, (4) assists in controlling emotions, and (5) reduces discussion time.

Third, along with managing time and controlling emotion, meeting facilitators, as well as all governmental officials in attendance, must demonstrate a listening and understanding attitude. Comments such as, "A listening attitude on the part of staff and elected officials" and "Listen, listen, listen" were made by many of the city manag-

ers regarding one of the keys to successful public hearings. If public officials project an attitude of closed-mindedness or defensiveness, probably nothing else can save the meeting from disaster. Covey observes that “the root cause of almost all people problems is the basic communication problem—people do not listen with empathy” (1991, 45).

Posthearing Factors

One frequently mentioned critical factor related to the posthearing phase of public hearings is effective follow-up. This factor includes appropriately using public hearing information in making final decisions and then communicating final decisions to the public. The public hearing literature states that citizen input should have a real and positive impact on decision outcomes. Further, the public should have at least some degree of satisfaction with the output. Our statistical analysis showed a high relationship between hearing success and subsequent open meetings to discuss the hearing’s findings and conclusions, supporting the idea that hearings should be held early enough in the decision process to make a difference. Citizens want to hold government accountable to its constituents and to know that public input matters, and effective postmeeting communication can fulfill these citizen desires. Handled effectively, the posthearing feedback can help to build critical citizen trust and foster ongoing citizen participation.

Summary and Conclusion

This study suggests that an effective public hearing results from successfully executing a series of steps. These steps are summarized in the following list and in figure 1. Failure to execute any point along the way can have a negative impact on the entire process.

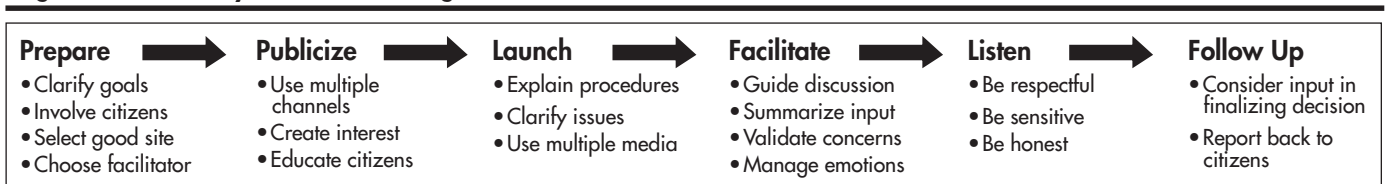
1. Carefully prepare for the hearing. Clarify goals, hold the hearing or alternative public participation events early in the decision process, select an appropriate site, and select an effective facilitator. Be sure the meeting facilitator possesses critical communication skills (for instance, he or she is open, unbiased, patient, nondefensive, and adaptable). Prepare government officials, develop detailed procedures, and prepare clear written and oral reports.

2. Effectively publicize the hearing using multiple media. Create public interest and educate citizens about what is involved and how they will be affected. Use multiple communication channels to notify, educate, and build interest.
3. Launch the meeting well. Clearly frame the key issues and use multiple media to help achieve understanding. Clarify the procedures to be used during the meeting.
4. Ensure the facilitator guides and moves the discussion along, clarifying and summarizing main points, assuring citizens of the value of their input, and managing citizens’ emotions.
5. Make sure that attending government officials carefully listen to and value citizens’ comments, remembering that they are stewards rather than owners. Help officials to be honest and forthright yet respectful and sensitive in their responses.
6. Follow up effectively after the meeting, carefully considering and using applicable input and reporting back to the citizenry.

In addition to these recommendations, public administrators should consider public hearings only one part of an overall public communication strategy. For example, because of the inherent limitations of public hearings, city officials should consider multiple participation methods, and they should not view convening a public hearing as full spirit-of-the-law compliance with public participation requirements.

Although the participants in this research included only city administrators, we believe many of the conclusions and recommendations can be adapted to other governmental entities. All levels and units of government face similar public participation challenges, and we believe the principles highlighted in this study are applicable in many settings. The study results can also provide a useful basis for public management classroom instruction and for further research on government communication.

Figure 1 Summary of Public Hearing Guidelines



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