

AFFORDABLE HOUSING ADVOCACY

HOW TO:

HOST A PUBLIC MEETING ABOUT AFFORDABLE HOUSING

GOALS

- Provide forum to educate and build support
- Enable discussion of problems and concerns
- Present your organization as professional, responsible and committed

KEY TECHNIQUES

- Provide ample time to thoroughly plan the meeting in advance
- Be prepared for opposition
- Always follow up on any outstanding issues after the meeting

Planning Before the Meeting

- Use **multiple means to invite people**, including mail fliers, newspaper notices and email.
- **Draft a specific and realistic time schedule** for each activity planned for the meeting.
- **Arrange to have project supporters in attendance**, ideally people known to the community. (Opponents are always easier to mobilize than supporters.) Prepare supporters to raise friendly questions that create opportunities to discuss project benefits.
- **Arrange to have a current tenant or prospective resident speak** at the meeting to “humanize” the need for your project. Allow time to prepare this person for their presentation, including the possibility of opposition.
- **Evaluate whether you can afford to hire a professional facilitator.** If not, choose a person to facilitate the meeting with experience managing similar meetings.

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- **Consider whether to divide the group into smaller discussion groups.** This enables quieter people to participate and denies opponents platform to vociferously spread fear and recruit opponents. It does require more facilitators so each group has a well informed supporter to dispel spread of misinformation.
- **Think about the appearance of your group.** You want to show respect for the public by looking professional and competent, but avoid looking too slick.
- **Have abundant supplies of your promotional materials,** name tags and business cards.
- **Arrange for translation and childcare** if it is likely to be required to enable significant attendance by this community.
- **Arrange for simple refreshments,** if possible from a local business.

During the Meeting

- **Start and end the meeting on time.**
- **Make sure that everyone can hear.** Have facilitator restate questions from the audience.
- **Be sensitive to local community culture.** Use the typical form of address, either titles such as Mr. And Ms. or first names.
- **Do not hesitate to say “I don’t know, I will get back to you on that,”** and be scrupulous about getting contact information and getting back with the answer. It is so much better than risking a half-truth or wrong answer after which it is nearly impossible to rebuild trust.
- **Do not engage in bargaining during the meeting.** Graciously accept ideas and explain your process for considering them. Be clear about any constraints or limitations that may make some ideas impossible.
- **Use humor and relevant anecdotes.** Keep the tone of the meeting friendly.

Handling Hostile Questions

- **Do not pass around a microphone**, to avoid enabling a loud opponent to “hijack” the meeting agenda.
- **Do not allow hostile questioners to dominate the meeting.** To respond to hostile questions, first restate the question then look at people other than the questioner while responding to include everyone in your answer. (This can be difficult as we are so programmed to lock into dialogue with the questioner.)
- **Accept that you may be unlikely to convert a hostile opponent in a public meeting.** Your goal is to prevent their opposition from infecting other people at the meeting who are undecided or supportive.
- **Do not ask hostile questioner “Did that answer your question?”** because it will provide an opening for the questioner to continue to dominate the discussion.

After the Meeting

- **Follow up on unanswered questions.**
- **Fulfill any promises or commitments made during the meeting.**
- **Make sure there is time for meeting planners to debrief** about what worked and did not work in order to better plan your next meeting.