Public Meetings

Description

The public meeting is a public forum that is fairly structured and formal in nature, and open to the general public, including PRPs, unaffected citizens, and activists. It usually features a presentation by the CIC, the RPM, and other members of the site team, as well as an opportunity for interaction with them.

EPA relies heavily upon public meetings as a communication tool. The purpose of the public meeting is to present information to the audience, and to receive information back from them.

Generally speaking, it is an ideal setting to:

- Deliver the same information at the same time to a large group;
- Enable community members to voice their concerns; and
- Foster interaction between the site team and the community.

Unfortunately, it also provides the ideal setting for:

- Information to be misunderstood or misheard;
- Exploitation of the forum for grandstanding and ulterior agendas; and
- Development of adversarial relationships.

Required Activity?

Yes, as follows:

- Proposed Plan—SARA 113 and 117(a)(2); and the NCP at 40 CFR § 300.430(f)(3)(i)(D) require "[t]he lead agency, after preparation of the proposed plan and review by the support agency, shall...[p]rovide the opportunity for a public meeting to be held during the public comment period at or near the site at issue..." They also require the agency to take a "transcript of the public meeting" and "make such transcript available to the public."
- Post ROD Significant Changes—the NCP at 40 CFR § 300.435(c)(2)(ii)(D) requires that the lead agency "shall [p]rovide the opportunity for a public meeting to be held during the public comment period" that ensues when the ROD is proposed to be amended.
- Completion of the Remedial Design—the NCP at 40 CFR § 300.435(c)(3) requires the lead agency to "[p]rovide, as appropriate, a public briefing prior to the initiation of the remedial action."

Making it Work

When to Use

The required meetings are noted above and discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of the Community Involvement Handbook. Other than the required meetings, you can use the public meeting to announce the beginning or end of an activity or phase, accomplishment of major milestones, and results of a study (after notifying affected individuals). Consider holding public meetings before the remedial investigation field work begins (as is the policy of some Regions), or at the 75 percent stage of the remedial design.

Such meetings allow the citizens to get their questions answered. However, remember that they also provide more opportunities to have others set the agenda once the meeting has

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started. Think about how availabilities, and special events might work to your advantage.

Regarding the actual scheduling of meetings, hold them at times that are convenient for the public. Typically, they should be on a weeknight (Monday - Thursday), generally not beginning before 7:00 pm or after 7:30 pm, and lasting not longer than two hours. Saturday afternoons may be a viable alternative.

The public meeting may not be the best tool for all occasions. The negatives associated with the dynamics of the public meeting can be considerable. They are not the recommended forum, other than in the required situations noted above, unless other options are less effective.

- **Do not use public meetings:**
  - For general information purposes without a major announcement;
  - Just because you feel it is time to have a presence in the community;
  - As the first or primary means of communication with a community; or
  - To announce for the first time bad or controversial news.
- **At specific times of the year:**
  - Avoid holidays and other vacations;
  - Do not attempt to compete with local special events; and
  - Avoid the week of April 15.

See Internet, Tab 10

The public meeting should be held in a location that is convenient and easily accessible to your target audience, including any disabled residents. The facility must meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). For requirements, visit the Center for Independence (CFI) ***Internet*** site: *www.centerforindependence.org/*. The site includes weekly updates and information about making your public space accessible: For a free copy of the ADA Guide for Small Businesses, published by the U.S. Department of Justice, call CFI at (970) 241-0315. The location needs to be able to accommodate the anticipated crowd; handle any lighting, ventilation and electrical burdens you may place on it; and have adequate, convenient, well-lighted parking. In most cases, your ***Community Involvement Plan*** should have identified at least one primary location.

See Community Involvement Plans, Tab 7

How to Use

There is no substitute for good planning; any lack of it will be readily apparent. Several attachments at the end of this tab, including an overall planning checklist, can help you.

Your job in the planning process is to help the RPM and other site team members. You must help them plan the messages, presentations, and visual aides. Help them anticipate questions, and plan the answers. It is up to you to help them to think like a citizen, not like an expert in hazardous waste. More than one site team has been caught off guard at a meeting by something that they thought was so routine as to not be an issue.

See Public Availability, Tab 30

It may be the RPM's idea to have a public meeting. Your challenge is to help them decide whether the intended purpose calls for a public meeting or an ***Availability*** or a workshop.

If the decision is to go ahead with a public meeting, and it is not the first such meeting for this site, consider having a pre-meeting for new people, rather than making everyone sit through the site history every meeting. Spend half an hour to an hour, before the real meeting starts, to give new people all of the background information. Then, when the real meeting starts, you can spend just a few minutes to set the stage for everyone and launch into the stated purpose of the meeting. For an established site, you will lose the audience fast if you spend time rehashing everything that has ever been said or done about the site.

Be there early, preferably with the site team, and greet the people as they arrive. Resist the temptation to retreat to a cluster of EPA people. Mingle with the residents, make them feel comfortable, and small talk with them while you are waiting to start the meeting.

Start the meeting on time.

Tips

- **Remember: two-way communication.** Resist the temptation to think of the public meeting merely as an expedient way to get information out to as many people as possible. Expect questions, statements, posturing, grandstanding, antagonism, support, anger, frustration — the whole spectrum of emotion.
- **Prepare a meeting kit.** Something like a catalog case pre-packed with items that invariably are needed at every meeting and, quite often, forgotten in the haste to leave on time. Use the check list at the end of this tab to build your own.
- **Insist on a dry run** with every participant practicing their role.
- **Approach a dry run, and the lessons learned session, candidly.** No one will benefit from a meeting of the mutual admiration society.

Related Tools/Resources in the Toolkit

- Public Availabilities/Poster Sessions, Tab 30
- Informal Activities, Tab 20
- Community Involvement Plans, Tab 7
- Community Interviews, Tab 5

Attached Items Within this Tool

- Attachment 1: Public Meeting Check List
- Attachment 2: Preparation
- Attachment 3: Execution — the Room
- Attachment 4: Execution — the Meeting
- Attachment 5: The Follow Up
- Attachment 6: Community Involvement Coordinator Meeting Kit

Attachment 1: Public Meeting Check List

Site: ______________________________

MEETING PREPARATION

___ Meeting date & time:__________________________
___ Meeting location: ____________________________
Name: ____________________________________
Phone #:___________________________________
Rental Rate: _________
Seating Capacity: ____________________________
___ Directions distributed:__________________________
___ Point of contact for facility arrangements
___ # of people expected: __________________________
___ Court reporter needed
Yes ___ No___
Name: ____________________________________
Contacted/confirmed: ____
Rate: ______
___ Translator needed
Yes ___ No ___
Name: ____________________________________
Contacted/confirmed: ____
Rate: ______
___ Panel members notified
___ RPM: _________________________________
___ Tox: __________________________________
___ Hydro: ________________________________
___ State: _________________________________
___ Local Officials: __________________________
___ Others: ________________________________
___ Prepare agenda
___ Prepare meeting evaluation forms
___ Prepare oral presentations
___ Identify Moderator/Facilitator:
___ Prepare Visual Presentation materials
___ Set dry run date and location
Date: __________ Time: _________________
Location: _______________________________
___ Conduct dry run
___ Establish ground rules
___ Last minute review and pep talk for the team

ANNOUNCEMENT
___ Call all key community contacts
___ Print set of mailing labels
___ Prepare and distribute fact sheet
___ Prepare press release
Release date: ___________
___ Sends materials to information repositories
___ Prepare public notice
Run date: (2-3 weeks prior):_____________________
Deadline: __________________________________
Cost: _____________________________________
Purchase request prepared: ______
Copy sent to newspaper, Date: ________________

AUDIO-VISUAL EQUIPMENT

___ Slide presentation/projector
___ Overhead transparencies/projector
___ Video tape presentation/television Set
___ Film presentation/projector
___ Projection screen
___ Microphones (stationary &/or remote)
___ Cassette recorder/tapes/batteries
___ 35mm camera/flash/film
___ Video camera/tape
___ Extension cord
___ 3-prong electric adaptor (several)
___ Pointer for projection screen
___ Extra bulb for projectors
___ Power strip

ROOM ARRANGEMENTS

___ Room layout __________________________________
___ ADA standards met?
___ Room setup
Who does it? You ___ Them____
___ Time available: _________________
___ Set up time:___________________
___ Must vacate by time: ____________
___ Security (meet prior to & day of)
___ Janitorial services
___ Restrooms open
___ Ventilation
___ First aid supplies
___ Return room to original condition
___ Who does it? You___ Them ___
___ Lecterns
___ Table w/mic for handicapped
___ Telephone access in case of emergency
___ Press table

BASIC SUPPLIES

___ Name plates/name tags
___ Directional signs
___ Copies of agenda/evaluation form
___ Copies of most recent fact sheets
___ 3" x 5" index cards
___ Pens/pencils
___ Markers
___ Easel/flip chart
___ Poster paper
___ Pad of blank paper
___ Chalk/eraser
___ Sign-in sheets
___ Masking Tape
___ Scissors
___ Business cards
___ Duct tape
___ Plastic drinking cups and pitcher
___ 1 yard of strong cord

MEETING FOLLOW-UP

___ Return equipment
___ Debriefing among meeting participants
___ Respond to requests for information
___ Distribute transcripts/meeting minutes
___ Send thank you letters
___ Prepare meeting evaluation
___ Distribute recommendations
___ Add meeting attendees to mailing list
___ Send names & phone #s to GPRA contractor

Attachment 2: Preparation

- **Use the Check List in attachment 1 to ensure that you have thought of and done everything possible to assure that the meeting goes smoothly.**
- **Establish the purpose.** Know why you are having this meeting. Clearly articulate your purpose and evaluate whether a public meeting is the best forum to achieve that purpose.
- **Plan your messages.** This will require coordination with the RPM and the Site Team. Remember, the average audience does not absorb or comprehend more than three primary messages in one session. Make sure the messages are consistent with your stated purpose.
- **Decide on a date.**
- **Plan the presentations.** Each formal presentation should be *no more than* 15 minutes, and ideally, the total of all the presentations should be 30 minutes or less.
  - The best presentation is brief, focused, and easy to follow and understand.
  - The objective is to present only enough information necessary for the audience to understand the essence of the message, leaving the details for follow up questions.
  - Avoid too much detail. That only serves to confuse, not help or impress.
- **Prepare an agenda.**
  - Identify roles for each key player.
  - The CIC is usually the moderator — opens the meeting, states the purpose of the meeting, establishes the ground rules, provides a very brief update to let people know how you got to this point, keeps things moving, and facilitates the Q&A session.
  - The RPM typically makes the technical presentation. However, this is not "law;" if the RPM is uncomfortable as a public speaker, or just does not come across well, it is appropriate for you to make the primary presentation and use the RPM as the technical expert resource.
  - Let the community participate in planning the meeting.
- **Reserve a meeting room.** Above all else, be sure that it meets ADA requirements. Beyond that, be sure that it is convenient for your target audience; large enough for the anticipated crowd; is reasonably comfortable; and has adequate lighting, ventilation, sound, and rest room facilities. Also, provide adequate parking (preferably free) and ensure the surrounding outside area is well lit.
- **Give at least two weeks' advance notice, preferably three.** A relatively large display ad in the local paper and a notice the fact sheet may be inadequate to stimulate attendance. Do something more to grab the public's attention, like door hangers or a mailing to the entire affected community (as opposed to just the mailing list) cordially inviting them to attend. Also, consider using community bulletin board shows on many local radio and TV stations.
- **Conduct at least one dry run** so that all participants, including yourself, can practice their presentations in front of a mock audience and become comfortable with the format and material. Listen for things that do not make sense or are difficult to understand. Pay close attention to heavy reliance on technical jargon or acronyms, or issues that are unrelated or inappropriate. Look for things in visual aids that make them hard to read or understand. Ask questions that you would logically expect from the audience. Raise issues that are or could be important to the audience, but which are improperly or inadequately addressed in the presentations. Conduct a brutally honest, but professional critique of the presentations after the dry run; stand firm on important points.
- **Arrange to document the meeting.** For the Proposed Plan Public Meeting, and other formal meetings or hearings, you will need to hire a court recorder to take a verbatim transcript and provide a notarized copy for the records. For less formal meetings you can use flip charts, or tape recorders, or have someone simply take notes in the back of the room (this is a perfect role for your contractor).

- **Notify the *media*, either via a news release or media advisory.** Do not assume that they paid attention to the public notice. Use them to get your message out and get people to attend. Consider a media availability event at the site early in the afternoon before the meeting. This will provide the media with visuals and an opportunity to talk to you and the RPM. The media will probably air the availability event on the early evening news, which will likely increase attendance at the evening meeting. It also can help minimize the tendency for the media to control the meeting, since they will already have their questions answered, and it will give you insight into issues that you or the RPM might not have considered in preparing for the meeting.

Attachment 3: Execution — the Room

- **Arrive well before the meeting.** If it is an evening meeting, get there mid afternoon; if it is an afternoon session, get there in the morning. Go prepared to work; you may want to move tables, chairs, etc.
- **Position the team with an exit behind you.** This is always good advice. However, if you are expecting a contentious, rowdy, or even violent crowd, it is imperative, even if you have to rearrange the room in an odd manner. If you cannot, have your boss, note taker, or someone reliable at the rear of the room, either with a cell phone or where they can reach a phone.
- **Arrange the room with thought.** Arrange the room with an emphasis on sending positive messages like openness and cooperation, rather than negative ones like closed mindedness.
- **Work from floor level.** Even if there is a stage or platform present, do NOT use it. It puts you "above" the audience and the message is immediately negative.
- **Presenters only up front.** There is strength in numbers, and the natural tendency is to have every team member "at the table," such as the RPM's boss and your boss — *Resist it.* There is nothing more disconcerting to the public than to be overwhelmed by a sea of government people. The RPM's supervisor, your supervisor, the hydrogeologist, the toxicologist, the State representatives, the contractors, the PRPs are resources and should be in the first row where they can be easily called upon to help clarify points or add further explanation.
- **If the team will be seated at a table.** Place it in front of the audience, but somewhat off to the side and angled toward them. Avoid the natural tendency to put it across the room between the Team and the audience; this appears to be a barrier and immediately sends a subconscious "us against them" message to the audience. Then plan to talk from the center, not from behind the table.
- **If the team will not be seated at a table.** Seat the presenters in front of the audience, and arrange the audience in a semicircle in front of you. Put your resource people to the side. This may be threatening, or at least uncomfortable, but it works well to break down barriers.
- **Have a lectern in the center.** This gives the speaker something to hold onto, as well as a place to put papers.
- **If you are using overhead transparencies.** Double check that the projector is focused and that all seats have a clear view.
- **Provide directions to the room.** Make sure you post conspicuous signs with arrows directing people from the parking areas to the room.
- **Have a sign-in table near the door.**
- **Have a small table with one chair** for the court recorder/note taker. Be sure to place it near an electrical outlet.
- **Last-minute location issues.** Make sure there are enough seats for the expected size of the group, and make sure they are spaced comfortably. Check the sound and ventilation systems to ensure that they work and that you know how to control them. Reconnoiter the rest of the facility to locate light switches, water fountains, rest rooms and emergency exits.

Attachment 4: Execution — the Meeting

- **Greet your audience.** As they arrive, mingle with the guests, make them feel welcome, and put them at ease. Have a greeter at the door (your contractor can do this) to explain the sign-in sheets and ask people to sign in. Do not stand in an isolated cluster of EPA people; this only fosters an "us vs. them" attitude. Make note of any local or state elected officials arriving so that you can introduce them during your other introductions.
- ***NOTE:*** *EPA's Office of General Counsel has determined that sign-in sheets must be released under FOIA. Do not tell your attendees that it is just for your mailing list and will remain confidential. Instead, tell them the sign-in sheet tells EPA how many people attended. If they are concerned about confidentiality, ask them to use their initials. To build a confidential mailing list, you must have a separate sheet, specifically identified for that purpose.*
- **Distribute the agenda as people enter.** During your opening, establish expectations regarding what citizens want from the meeting, what they can expect from the meeting. If you prefer not to hand out individual copies of the agenda, post the agenda where everyone can see it.
- **Make sure that you and your team are trained in dealing with the media.**
  - Be prepared for media attendance, especially if the site is contentious.
  - Be prepared for them to arrive at anytime before or during the meeting.
  - Be prepared for them to want to talk to residents during the meeting.
  - Be prepared for them to leave at any time during the meeting.
  - Try to have a location set aside that works for them as well as you.
  - If possible, introduce the media to the key players and assist them with their interviews in any way appropriate.
- **Start on Time.** This shows respect for the audience. One CIC tells of citizens referring to "EPA time," certain that EPA does not care because they never start things on time, and rarely even show up on time. He refers to one meeting where the team was still at the dinner table, several miles from the meeting location, when the meeting was scheduled to start.
- **Make necessary introductions.** Introduce yourself, other presenters, other resource people, and state and local elected officials who might be present.
- **Set the stage.** Briefly review the purpose of the meeting, provide a very brief update on what brought you to this point, set the ground rules for questions and comments, then introduce the next presenter.
- **Be honest about what they can expect from EPA.** There are many misinterpretations about what EPA can and will do; these often lead to frustration and disillusionment.
- **Remember that you are the government.** Answers like "it's not my job" or "that's not our area of responsibility" never sit well with taxpayers. Remember that you and the other team members are "public servants." Try to be responsive to all issues raised, even if it means having to find another government agency to refer them to. If you have to say "I don't know," make sure you add "but I'll find the answer and get back to you by ... ." Then make sure that you have your assistant get with the person to record the name, phone number, and question so that you *can* get back to them. If you commit to getting back to someone, be sure to do it in a timely fashion.
- **Be flexible.** If the situation warrants it, change your format, agenda and/or approach as appropriate and agreeable with the audience. This might be "your" meeting, but it is for the public. Structure the meeting to convey the information that they need.

Questions/Comments

- **Establish ground rules before you open the floor to questions and comments.** These can vary from meeting to meeting, depending on the physical arrangements, and might include such things as raising your hand to be recognized; one person at a time; one question per person at a time; or form a line at the microphone in the center aisle.

- **Rephrase the questions before answering.** This benefits the entire audience, ensures that the question is understood by the team, and gives the responding team member a few extra moments to formulate an answer.
- **Listen, listen, listen!!** Listen to what is being asked and answer *that* question. Do not answer the question that you want to answer, wish had been asked, or thought had been asked. Do not finish anyone's question or statement.
- **Remember your role as team communicator.** Be alert for a team member resorting to technical jargon in an attempt to answer a question, situations in which the answer does not seem to be working, and situations in which the team member does not seem to understand the question. In such situations, it is appropriate and helpful for you to step in as the team communicator and try to rephrase either the answer or the question. Be sure to be "politically correct" when doing this, but it is an important role that you can fill.
- **Do not "feed the microphone."** Resist the temptation to expound on your answer or the issue. By giving a more detailed answer than is needed, the answer can get lost, the person can get confused, and people waiting to ask questions can get frustrated. If they want to know more or desire greater detail, they will ask.
- **Do not make value judgements about any comments or questions.** Adding comments like "that's a good question" can make those who did not get such a response feel inadequate or stupid, and can often deter further questions. All questions are good ones; there are no stupid questions, so answer all questions without editorializing.
- **Remember the difference between a question and a comment.** Questions require answers; comments do not. Avoid at all costs the urge to explain your position or defend a decision in response to a comment. This is good advice at any public meeting, but it is critical advice for any meeting during the comment period. A simple "thank you," and perhaps something like "we have recorded your comment and will be sure to consider it," is an acceptable, safe response to a comment.
- **Do not be defensive.** It only deteriorates a hostile situation.
- **Do not distance yourself from EPA decisions and positions and do not defend EPA.** Simply explain the position or decision and the rationale behind it without editorial opinion. Refrain from making comments like, "I didn't make that decision."
- **Remember that you are there to get information as well as disseminate it.** You are receiving input, accept it without over-committing. Make sure you understand and communicate the Agency's intentions relative to public comment (this is clearer in instances where a public comment period is required, but is equally important in other instances as well). Do not ask for input that the Agency is not committed to considering.

Attachment 5: The Follow up

- **Have some form of "lessons learned" meeting.** Include the entire team as soon as possible after the meeting. This is important, and needs to be more than just a reassurance of each other's good work. It needs to be a critical review of what went well, what did not go well, why it did or did not, and what can be done to make it better next time.
- **Make sure to follow up on commitments made at the meeting.** If you agreed to get more information, send out materials, or call someone back—Do it!
- **Consider writing a summary response to comments.** If you or the team committed to consider comments, write a summary response to comments and send it to every attendee for whom you have an address and those on the mailing list. You could consider publishing it in the local paper as well. The summary should also state how EPA will proceed.

Attachment 6: Community Involvement Coordinator Meeting Kit

Minimum Contents:

3" x 5" Index cards
Poster paper
Several pads of blank paper
Blank transparencies
Pad of flip chart paper
Business cards
Collapsible pointer
Laser pointer
Multiple outlet power strip
3-prong electrical adapter (at least 1)
50 foot extension cord
Portable easel
Collapsible wheeled cart to carry everything

Pens and pencils
Flip chart markers
Transparency markers
Chalk and eraser
One yard of strong cord
Stapler and staples
Paper clips
Clothes pins (spring type)
Push pins
Masking tape
Duct tape
Scissors