Public Meetings

Overview

A public meeting is a structured, formal meeting that is open to the general public. The purpose of a public meeting largely is to present information to the audience and to receive information from the community. A public meeting generally includes presentations from EPA. Members of the site team include on-scene coordinators (OSCs); remedial project managers (RPMs); risk assessors; community involvement coordinators (CICs); state, tribal, and local government partners; and staff from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR).

*This and all tools in the Community Involvement Toolkit should be used in conjunction with the **Community Involvement Handbook**, which provides guidance to EPA staff on how EPA typically plans and implements community involvement activities at Superfund sites.*

Why This Is Important

Public meetings are important because they allow the lead agency to both provide information to and receive feedback from the public at specific points during the Superfund process. While EPA Regions may choose to hold discretionary meetings, public meetings are required under the National Contingency Plan (NCP) at these times during the Superfund process:

- Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) 113(k)(2)(B)(iii) 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."
- The NCP at 40 CFR §300.435(c)(2)(ii)(D-E) says that the lead agency shall "[p]rovide the opportunity for a public meeting to be held during the public comment period at or near the facility at issue" following a proposed amendment to the record of decision (ROD). The lead agency should keep "a transcript of comments made during the public meeting."

Implementation

Public meetings specified in the NCP should be conducted in accordance with requirements regarding the timing and location of the public meeting. For required public meetings, EPA generally announces the public meeting with a ***public notice*** notifying the community of a ***public comment period***. Generally, the Agency uses a court reporter to record the proceedings so that public comments can be compiled and a transcript can be prepared and made available to the community. Comments from the public usually are noted in the transcript but are not directly addressed or answered during the meeting. The transcript becomes part of the administrative record and is placed in the ***information repository***. A public meeting also can be a good method for collecting comments during a public comment period, even when the public meeting may not be specified in the NCP (e.g., for a deletion from the National Priorities List).

Some Regions also hold public meetings for other purposes, such as to announce the beginning or end of a project activity or phase, accomplishment of major milestones, or results of a study (after notifying affected individuals). Some Regions hold public meetings before the remedial investigation field work begins, or at the 75 percent stage of the remedial design.

Public meetings can be a good setting in which to deliver information to a large group of people at the same time. However, because public meetings are structured, formal meetings, and also sometimes can be contentious, they often are not the recommended forum for information exchange, other than when required. See box on page 2 for advice on when holding a public meeting may, or may not, be appropriate.

Planning for a Public Meeting

Defining Roles and Responsibilities

The first step in the planning process is to identify roles and responsibilities for each member of the

Determining When to Hold a Public Meeting

The community involvement coordinator should advise the remedial project manager whether a public meeting is the best method for an intended purpose, or whether an alternative method of communicating with the community might be preferred.

For example, it usually is not a good idea to use public meetings:

- *for general information purposes without a major announcement;*
- *simply 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 bad or potentially controversial news for the first time.*

Consider whether informal meetings or events that allow for more one-on-one contact with individuals or small groups of people might be more appropriate. A ***public availabilities/poster session*** *is a good alternative to a public meeting.*

site team. Individual roles can vary from meeting to meeting. The CIC usually serves as the moderator at a public meeting, and is responsible for keeping the meeting focused and moving ahead. Typically, the moderator opens the meeting, states the purpose of the meeting, establishes the ground rules, introduces speakers, and facilitates the question and answer session, if one is included. Either the CIC or the RPM may provide a brief site update. The RPM typically gives the technical presentation. However, if the RPM is uncomfortable as a public speaker or is not an effective presenter, the CIC or another member of the site team can make the primary presentation, and the RPM can act as the technical expert.

As the team member most familiar with working in communities, the CIC also has the job of helping the RPM and other members of the site team navigate the meeting planning process, develop a good agenda, and communicate effectively with the audience. This includes defining the purpose of the meeting and identifying the key messages EPA wants to deliver. As a rule, there should be no more than three primary messages, which should be consistent with the meeting's purpose.

The CIC can help members of the site team develop simple and interesting presentations and visual aids to communicate key messages, by thinking like community members, rather than as experts in hazardous waste. Work with the site team to develop a list of questions that community members might ask, along with suggested responses. On occasion, site teams have been caught off guard at a public meeting by not anticipating a topic or question that is raised by the public.

Define the support roles for the meeting. Decide whether you will need to engage the services of a court reporter, which is recommended for all required public meetings when a transcript should be prepared. A court reporter can record the meeting and produce a verbatim transcript. Keep a notarized copy for the records. For less formal meetings, you can use flip charts or tape recorders, or have someone take notes. Contractors also can take notes at non-required public meetings, or assist in greeting and signing in residents.

Tips for Preparing the Site Team

- *Insist on a dry run with every participant practicing their role.*
- *Be candid during dry runs and post-meeting lessons learned sessions. These sessions are useful only if everyone on the team is critical and honest with each other.*
- *Gather supplies, including items that generally are needed at every meeting but are often forgotten. (See Attachment 1: Public Meeting Checklist).*

Scheduling the Meeting

Schedule the meeting at a time that is convenient for the public. Typically, meetings should be held on a weeknight (Monday - Thursday), beginning at 7:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., and should last no longer than two hours. However, Saturday afternoons may be a viable alternative for some communities. Avoid holidays, and research local events to make sure that the meetings do not compete with any scheduled local events.

Choosing the Location

The meeting should be held in a location that is convenient, comfortable and easily accessible for your audience, and have well-lit parking, or access to public transportation. The meeting place should be equipped with adequate lighting, restroom facilities, ventilation, and electrical capacity for your purposes. It also should be accessible for disabled residents and meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). (For requirements and information about making your public space accessible, visit the ADA website.) In most cases, your ***community involvement plan*** (CIP) should identify at least one primary location in the community for such a meeting. It is best to use a facility that does not require a contract, and the facility should be made aware beforehand that the meeting is sponsored by the federal government.

Notifying the Community and the Media

Notify the community about the meeting at least three weeks in advance. For required public meetings, the public notice typically will inform the community about the meeting. However, a formal notice usually is not enough to stimulate attendance. Do something to grab the public's attention. If the community is technologically savvy, consider a social media announcement or an email to the entire affected community (as opposed to just the mailing list) inviting everyone to attend. You also should consider placing newspaper announcements, posting bulletins throughout the community, or going door-to-door, especially in communities where many members do not regularly access the internet. The best strategy usually is to use a variety of outreach mechanisms to get the word out.

Notify the media (see the ***Media Relations*** tool) via a news release or media advisory prior to the meeting. 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 before the meeting itself. It also can help minimize the tendency for the media to control the meeting, since their questions have already been answered, and it will provide you with insight into issues that you might not have considered.

Practicing for the Meeting

Conduct at least one dry run prior to the meeting so that all participants can practice their presentations in front of a mock audience and become comfortable with the format and their materials. Listen for things that do not make sense, are difficult to understand, or are unrelated or inappropriate. Look for issues in visual aids that make them hard to read or understand. If you are having a question and answer session, ask questions that you would logically expect from the audience. Conduct a brutally honest but professional critique of the presentations after the dry run.

Holding a Public Meeting

Before the Meeting

On the day of the meeting, arrive early, preferably with the site team, and greet residents as they arrive. As people arrive, make sure that they check in and sign the sign-in sheet, and provide them with the agenda. Resist the temptation to retreat to a cluster of EPA people. Mingle with the residents, make them feel comfortable, and make small talk with them while you are waiting to start the meeting.

During the Meeting

Start the meeting on time. Resist the urge to have every member of the site team sit at the table in the front of the room. Limit the table to the people making presentations. Instead, have others, such as the hydrogeologist, the toxicologist, contractors, potentially responsible parties (PRPs), supervisors, and others sit nearby in the first row where they can be easily called upon to help clarify points or provide further explanation (see Attachment 2: *Tips for Room Setup*).

If the purpose of the public meeting is to receive comments for a public comment period, it should be structured as a listening session. Agency representatives should acknowledge but not respond directly to comments voiced by community members. Make sure that you set the stage clearly at the beginning by communicating that the purpose of the meeting is for EPA to listen to community input and that EPA will respond to comments in a responsiveness summary at the end of the public comment period.

If the purpose of the public meeting is to convey information, explain the purpose and review the agenda and ground rules at the beginning of the meeting, including when and how comments and questions from the audience will be addressed. While you should have a well-thought-out agenda, flexibility is essential. In some cases, your discussions may evolve based on questions posed by community members, and a presentation may go a bit differently than anticipated. In rare instances when the situation warrants it, be prepared to adjust your agenda accordingly, as long as the audience agrees. Remember that while this might be EPA's meeting, it is for the public.

Establish the ground rules before you open the floor to questions and comments. Remember the difference between a question and a comment. Questions require answers but comments do not. Avoid the urge to explain the Agency's position or defend a decision in response to a comment. This is good advice for any public meeting, but it is critical advice for public meetings held in connection with a comment period. A simple "thank you," and perhaps something like "we have recorded your comment and will be sure to consider it," is the appropriate response to a comment.

When taking questions from the public, remember that you and the other site team members are public servants. Answers such as, "it's not my job" or "that's not our area of responsibility" never sit well with taxpayers. Try to be responsive to all issues raised, even if it means having to explain EPA's role and the need to refer a question to another government agency. If you have to say "I don't know," make sure you add "but I'll find the answer and get back to you" and provide a specific date in the near future. Make sure that you or a team member records the person's 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 (see Attachment 3: *Tips for Conducting a Successful Meeting*).

After the Meeting

For public meetings that provide an opportunity for community members to offer public comments and are specified in the NCP, a transcript usually is

Sign-In Sheets for Public Meetings

Sign-in sheets allow you to see who attended the meeting and to gather contact information that can be used to share information about the site in the future. However, sign-in sheets also allow for the collection of personally identifiable information (PII), such as names and home addresses or home telephone numbers. Some community members may not be comfortable with releasing this information publicly, so people who sign in for a public meeting should be given the option of using their initials in lieu of listing their full name.

General EPA policy regarding the collection and release of PII consists of the following:

- In general, sign-in sheets and mailing lists are subject to EPA's Privacy Policy. As a result, EPA staff typically should consult with the Office of Regional Counsel or Office of General Counsel before determining whether to disclose or withhold the information. A Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request may be required.
- If a FOIA request is received, it is possible that some personal information, such as names, could be released to the FOIA requestor. The personal privacy exemption under FOIA (exemption 6) may often apply, and after balancing the personal privacy interests against public interest, EPA may determine that some PII should not be released. Release of PII for FOIA requests is determined on a case-by-case basis, and EPA programs should consult with their FOIA office or counsel when making this determination.

To clarify the collection and release of PII for community members, please consider displaying the following disclaimer language on public sign-in sheets, public mailing lists, or any other time when PII is collected:

The information you provide here is subject to EPA's Privacy Policy and may be disclosed consistent with federal laws and regulations, including under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). EPA's Privacy Policy should not be confused with the Privacy Act, which generally does not cover sign-in sheets and mailing lists, but may cover other collected information.

If collected information is subject to the Privacy Act, please follow the procedures outlined in the system of records notice, including any requisite disclaimer language..

required and must be placed in the administrative record and information repository. The NCP also requires EPA to prepare a summary with responses to all significant comments received during the public comment period, including comments received during the public meeting.

For discretionary public meetings, a transcript is not required. However, have someone take detailed notes, including a record of what was said, action items, and items for follow-up after the meeting. Be sure to review these notes soon after the meeting. Complete action items, and provide whatever feedback or complete follow-up activities that were promised in a timely manner. Consider writing a summary response to comments and send it to every attendee for whom you have an address and those on the mailing list.

It is important to hold a lessons learned meeting with the entire team within a week of the public meeting. This meeting should be a critical review of what went well, what did not go well, and what could be done to improve the next meeting.

Attachments

- Attachment 1: *Public Meeting Checklist*
- Attachment 2: *Tips for Room Setup*
- Attachment 3: *Tips for Conducting a Successful Meeting*

Attachment 1: Public Meeting Checklist

Site: ______________________________

Venue Address: _____________________

Meeting Preparation

☐ Meeting date and time: ____________________
☐ Meeting location: *(enter venue info below)*
Venue name: ______________________
Contact Name: ____________________
Phone #: _________________________
Rental Rate: $______
Seating Capacity: _________________
☐ Create meeting flyer
☐ Number of people expected: ____
☐ Court reporter needed: Yes ☐ No ☐
Name/Contact Info: ________________
Contacted/confirmed: ____
Rate: $______
☐ Translator needed: Yes ☐ No ☐
Name/Contact Info:________________
Contacted/confirmed: ____
Rate: $______
☐ Panel members notified (*list names below*)
☐ RPM: ____________________
☐ Tox: ____________________
☐ Hydro: __________________
☐ State: ___________________
☐ Local Officials: ____________
☐ Others: __________________
☐ Prepare agenda
☐ Prepare meeting evaluation forms
☐ Prepare presentations
☐ Identify moderator/facilitator
☐ Confirm moderator/facilitator
☐ Prepare presentation materials
☐ Schedule dry run date and location
(enter dry run info below)
Date: ___________ Time: ____________
Location: ________________________
☐ Dry run conducted
☐ Last minute review and pep talk for the team

Announcement

☐ Alert all key community contacts
(phone, email, public notices)
☐ Print mailing labels
☐ Prepare and distribute fact sheet(s)
☐ Prepare press release
Release date: ___________
☐ Send materials to information repositories
☐ Prepare public notice *(enter notice info below)*
Run date: (2-3 weeks prior) ____________
Deadline: ___________
Cost: ____________________________
Purchase request prepared: _____
Copy sent to newspaper (date): ____________

Audio-Visual Equipment

☐ Laptop computer and power cord
☐ Overhead projector
☐ DVD/Video presentation/television set
☐ Projection screen
☐ Microphones (stationary and/or remote)
☐ Cassette or digital recorder/tapes/batteries
☐ Digital camera
☐ Video camera/tape
☐ Extension cord
☐ 3-prong electric adaptor (several)
☐ Pointer for projection screen
☐ Extra bulb for projectors
☐ Power strip
☐ Flip charts and markers

Room Arrangements

☐ Room layout ____________________________
☐ ADA standards met?
☐ Room setup *(enter times below)*
☐ Time available: ___________
☐ Setup time: ____________
☐ Must vacate by: __________
☐ Security (meet prior to and day of)
☐ Janitorial services
☐ Restrooms open
☐ Ventilation
☐ First aid supplies
☐ Return room to original condition
☐ Lecterns
☐ Accessible table w/mic
☐ Telephone access in case of emergency
☐ Press table

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 and phone #s to GPRA contractor

Meeting Supplies

☐ 3" x 5" index cards
☐ Pens and pencils
☐ Flip chart pad
☐ Flip chart markers
☐ Blank pads of paper
☐ Dry erase markers
☐ 1-yard strong cord
☐ Business cards
☐ Stapler and staples
☐ Paper clips
☐ Laser pointer
☐ Extra batteries
☐ Multiple outlet power strips
☐ 3-prong electrical adapter
☐ 50-foot extension cord
☐ Masking tape
☐ Duct tape
☐ Scotch tape
☐ Push pins
☐ Portable easel
☐ Scissors
☐ Hand cart to carry everything

Attachment 2: Tips for Room Setup

- **Arrange the room in a thoughtful manner.** How you set up the area where presenters will sit, and how chairs are arranged for the audience can send powerful signals. Arrange the room with an emphasis on sending positive messages such as openness and cooperation. Keep the exits in mind when setting up a room so that you can safely and easily exit if the crowd becomes contentious.
- **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.
- **Setting up the room:**
  - **If the team will be seated at a table:** Place the table in front of the audience, but somewhat off to the side and angled toward them, if possible.
  - **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.
  - **Have a small table with one chair** for the court reporter or notetaker. Be sure to place it near an electrical outlet.
  - **Have a lectern in the center.** This gives the speaker something to hold on to, as well as a place to put papers.
- **Find a place to set up displays.** Identify suitable locations for displays that are accessible to attendees. Ask the facility manager if you can pin or tape flip charts and other displays on the walls of the room. Have easels available, if necessary.
- **Survey the facility** to locate light switches, water fountains, restrooms, and emergency exits.
- **Provide directions to the room.** Make sure you post clear signs with arrows directing people from the parking areas to the room.

Attachment 3: Tips for Conducting a Successful Meeting

- **Be honest about what residents can expect from EPA.** There are many misinterpretations about what EPA can and will do, and these can lead to frustration and disillusionment.
- **Remember two-way communication.** Expect questions, statements, posturing, grandstanding, antagonism, support, anger, frustration — the whole spectrum of emotions.
- **Establish ground rules at the beginning, before you open the floor to questions or comments.** Decide ahead of time how you would like to take questions (via a line at the microphone stand, a microphone runner, residents raising their hands, etc.), and inform the audience at the beginning of the meeting.
- **Answer questions carefully and thoughtfully.** Repeat each question to confirm you heard it correctly and make sure everyone heard it. Take your time when composing an answer.
- **Listen, listen, listen!**
  - Listen to what is being asked and answer that question.
  - In the event that participants are talking over you, avoid the temptation to say things such as "if you would just let me finish…" Instead, stop talking, and start listening to what the audience is saying. Rather than trying to talk over the crowd, write down what you hear on a flip chart to help calm the room down. The audience will see that you are listening to their concerns and once the room quiets down, communicate that you hear their concerns and will commit to responding.
- **Remember your role as team communicator.** In situations where a member of the site team is using too much technical jargon, providing an inadequate answer, or not seeming to understand the question, it is appropriate and helpful to step in and try to rephrase the answer or restate the question.
- **Remember the difference between a question and a comment.** Questions require answers, but comments do not. Just say thank you when a comment is offered.
- **Do not be defensive.** It will not help a contentious 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 such as, "I did not make that decision."
- **Prepare a meeting evaluation form.** Meeting evaluation forms allow the community to give you feedback that can assist you with planning meetings in the future. Feedback includes asking how attendees thought the meeting went, what they found most useful, and what could be done to improve a presentation or meeting. Develop an evaluation form that focuses on the information you would most like to receive from the audience. Prepare copies to hand out at the meeting, and designate someone from your team to ensure forms are completed and collected. (See the ***Evaluating Community Involvement Activities*** tool for more information.)