

How To Organize Community Meetings

- Do you have low attendance at your community meetings?
- Do your meetings drag on and go nowhere?
- Do people forget or fail to follow through on things they agreed to do?

If so, the tips on organizing and planning meetings provided in this document may be helpful.

What Is the Purpose of a Community Meeting?

By bringing together a cross-section of viewpoints, a community meeting is the perfect setting to exchange ideas and information. In a successful meeting, a variety of active participants are brought together, information and opinions are shared, resources and volunteers are identified, and goals and action plans are established.

What Is the Problem?

A lot of time and money is wasted in poorly-managed meetings. We all have been to meetings where we begin lamenting in the first five minutes, "This is going to be a long meeting," or those where the group leader rambles on, making us wonder, "Why am I here?" These poorly run-meetings are often the product of inadequate preparation and organization.

How Should a Community Meeting be Planned and Organized?

- **Plan early:** Start planning at least one month (or as early as possible) before the meeting date.
- **Designate a planning committee:** Although a community meeting is a community-wide event, it is helpful to designate a civic organization or a separate committee to handle the planning or organization of the meeting.
- **Set a date, time and place:** Make sure to avoid conflict with other regularly-scheduled meetings and plan a snow date (if necessary).
- **Develop and set a goal:** Why are you holding the meeting? Establish a clear goal or objective for the meeting. For example:

"To present results of a town survey to the community."

"To solicit opinions from community members on strengths and weaknesses of the community."

A meeting without a well-stated and well-publicized goal will not be well attended. Remember, time is precious to everyone, especially in small communities. Let citizens know what to expect from the meeting and what will be expected from them.

- **Develop an agenda:** The agenda should naturally follow the stated goals. Think about your audience when inviting guest speakers and developing the program. What is likely to interest and involve everyone? The group should know what to expect before attending a meeting. You should be clear about what is being planned, how the meeting is going to be run, and who is going to play what role. Make sure not to overload the agenda. Once the agenda is set make sure that the meeting starts and ends on time.

- **Invite participation:** Community meetings should be as inclusive as possible. Invite youths, elderly, teachers, bankers, farmers and every one in between. It is also important to include representatives from your town's churches, businesses, civic organizations, and city and county government. Note: in organizing a community meeting you have to be

sensitive to its diversity. Many communities have ethnic, cultural, and social differences that you need to accommodate. For example, if your community is bilingual it is essential that you obtain a translator and print all documents in both languages to give everyone in the community a chance to participate.

● **Publicize:** Usually the local media takes an active role in promoting events deemed beneficial to the community. Develop a contact person at the local print and visual media and provide them with a short press release on the specifics of the meeting. By catching the interest of the community newspaper and radio and television stations, the community meeting will attract more attention among the general public.

● **Increase Attendance:** 1) Have each person on the planning committee bring one or two community members to the meeting. 2) Ask chairpersons of various community organizations to announce the community meeting in their regular meetings. 3) Create a phone pyramid by asking two people to call two of their friends to explain the meeting and encourage them to attend, and then have them call two of their friends to do the same and so on.

● **Followup:** It is important to provide follow-up information about the results of the meeting. Providing information through a press release, letters to the editor, or mailing to area groups or organizations are important ways to let people know that their input was meaningful and useful.

How to Evaluate Your Community

To ensure that your meetings are successful and that they address the needs of the audience, you need feedback. If you have the time, it is worth asking participants to complete an evaluation before they leave the meeting. Make the evaluation brief and easy to complete. Ask a few questions about both the content and the format of the meeting that will help you plan future meetings. Ask participants not to sign the evaluations.

Additional Information

● *Make Your Town Hall Meetings a Success* at the following Internet address:

***`gopher://UNLVM.UNL.EDU:/71/00/
commdev/townhall.text`***

Additional copies are available from the Office of Community Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Room 701, 300 7th Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20024 (1-800-645-4712). Copies may also be obtained at

<http://ocd.usda.gov>