

Getting the Most From THE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION PROCESS

My first job in local government was administering part of a City’s Housing program. While I understood what was required to complete my day to day work, I was not at all clear on the broader concepts: Why were some programs funded and not others? Who decides where and how to invest HUD funds in the City? When I learned that the City was beginning their Consolidated Planning process and that public meetings would be held to solicit the Citizen input that would ultimately shape our HUD programs, I couldn’t wait to attend.



BY LISA HOFFMEYER

I was interested to learn what our residents thought of the work our department was doing, get feedback on how we could improve current programs and find out what other ideas they might have.

When I mentioned my enthusiasm to my coworkers, they all just shook their heads and told me not to get my hopes up. Sadly, they were right- not one person showed up at any of the public meetings, nor did anyone submit a single written comment. The Citizen’s Participation process was a total bust and I couldn’t help but think that a great opportunity had been wasted.

Fortunately, times have changed. When HUD introduced the eCon Planning Suite in 2012, in addition to the new web based system, greater emphasis was placed on the Citizen’s Participation process and data driven needs analysis. It is clear that HUD’s intent is that communities fund programs and projects that are both needed (as indicated by data) and wanted by the community.

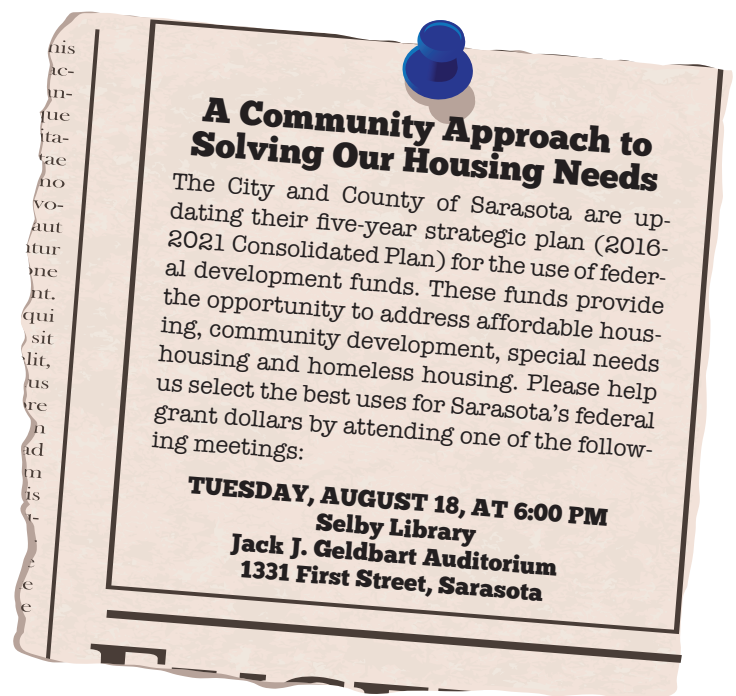
The Florida Housing Coalition has become a leader in promoting and implementing innovative methods to better engage communities in the Citizen Participation process. Increased citizen participation leads to better educated residents, better coordination among service providers, and more community support for your programs.

TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION PROCESS

1. Better Advertising and Outreach

A typical public notice published in the local paper tends to be written in dry “government speak” and can be intimidating to readers.

Here is a sample of a more user friendly notice developed in Sarasota:



Post the notice on the front page of your City/County website if you can. Ask community partners if they can include the announcement on their sites as well- think Housing Authority, United Way, Homeless Coalition, CRA, Planning Council, etc. Post on other media- Facebook, Twitter, public access TV, utility bills and community newsletters. Make a short announcement at Commission meetings, neighborhood associations and other community groups to spread the word.

2. Assess your internal capacity.

Developing and implementing a robust Citizen’s Participation Plan takes time. If your staff resources are strained,

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consider engaging a reputable consultant to design and oversee all or part of the process. **Hint: The Florida Housing Coalition is available, call us to discuss your needs!**

3. Electronic Surveys

Use online surveys to reach a wider audience. It's easy to add a survey link to your advertising and the response is typically quite good. Limit the survey to about 25 questions and allow some space for respondents to type in more detailed feedback. The survey can be downloaded in chart or graph form and easily incorporated into the eCon template. Some common online surveys are Survey Monkey, Question Pro, Survey Gizmo and Zoomerang.

4. Develop a Database

Start developing a good data base of community leaders, interested residents and housing and economic development organizations. Keep the list updated so you can easily send out an email blast announcing the public participation process.

5. Public Meetings

Consider breaking the public meetings into 2 groups- "Stakeholders" and "Citizens". Community Stakeholders such as Homeless Coalition members, Housing Authority staff, Economic Development groups, Social Service providers etc. tend to be more informed than the general public about the work you do and eligible activities. These groups can provide a professional perspective on community needs, while "regular" citizens or neighborhood groups likely need some basic education on how HUD funds are used and may have more targeted comments based on their own experience in the community. The public meeting agenda and format should be adjusted to fit the audience.

Hold meetings at convenient times depending on the audience. We've had great success holding the Stakeholder meetings during business hours and Citizen meetings in the evening and weekends. It's helpful if you can prep someone in the audience ahead of time to ask the first question and break the ice. Seating at round tables vs. classroom style seems to encourage more conversation. Refreshments are always a draw!

Prepare a short presentation about the Consolidated Planning process and how your City/County has used funds in the past. Include photos highlighting your work. Pull together some data tables or create maps that indicate community needs, demographics and housing market features.

Think about how you are going to capture the comments:

RECORD THE MEETING: This is easy to do, but transcribing the notes afterward is time consuming.


LIVE NOTES: Recruit another staff person to take notes at the meeting.

COMMENT CARDS: In addition to capturing live comments, prepare note cards for people to write down ideas they may not have voiced during the meeting and collect the cards at the end of the meeting.

FLIPCHARTS: Place flipcharts around the room with various topics (Housing Needs, Public Service Needs...) and have attendees write comments under each heading. Alternatively, you can provide sticky notes and have participants write on the notes, which they place on the appropriate flipchart.

DOT VOTING: Affix a number of ideas or proposals to a wall. Provide attendees with 5-10 stick on dots found at any office supply store. Have them go around the room and "vote" with their dots. After everyone has voted, tally the votes and lead a discussion on the ideas receiving the most votes.

Vary the location as well. Stakeholders are usually comfortable in City/County Hall, while the other groups may prefer to meet in a nearby community center.

For more great ideas, check out HUD's excellent guide on Citizen Participation: <https://www.hudexchange.info/consolidated-plan/econ-planning-suite-citizen-participation-and-consultation-toolkit/> 



If you would like assistance with preparing your Consolidated Plan, call us at 850.878.4219 or email us at info@flhousing.org and we will prepare a proposal to fit your needs.