

Transportation Outreach Planner

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Public Outreach Strategies

Open Houses / Open Forum Hearings

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Recommended Target Groups

Education

College Education
High School Diploma
No High School Diploma

Language

Creole
Other
Spanish

Disability

Hearing Impaired
Other
Physically Challenged
Sight Impaired

Income

Low Income
Middle to Affluent

Vehicle Ownership

Non-vehicle Owner
Vehicle Owner

Race and Ethnicity

Race and Ethnicity

Age

Seniors

Working Age Adults

Youth

Strategy Class

- General

Strategy Types

- Educational

Description

An open house is an event where people are invited to view exhibits and review information about a plan or project. An open forum hearing includes exhibits, but also provides participants an opportunity to record their comments on a formal transcript. These types of events help to accommodate people who are reluctant to speak in front of an audience since they provide participants the opportunity to interact with staff and ask detailed questions in an informal setting. It is possible to combine the two types of events by having an open house format and setting aside a specific time for forum presentations and questions and answers (Q&A). After the forum, people can be invited to go back to the open house.¹

Special Uses

Open houses and open forum hearings can be used to:²

- Launch a plan, project, or policy
- Increase awareness or interest regarding a project
- Increase agency visibility

When to Use

Although open houses and open forum hearings are often used for projects, these types of events can also be used any time an agency wants to inform the public and encourage informal, casual participation. They can be utilized in the early stages of a plan or project to gather information from residents, or at the end of the process to reveal the completed project. They are often used for complex projects, since various phases of a project can be broken into smaller exhibits.³

Cost

* Low (up to \$999)

Open houses and open forum hearings tend to be minimally expensive. However, expenses can increase with the complexity of the project and the scale of graphics or display required. Costs include staff time, space rental, and production of handouts and displays. Costs can be reduced if the location space is donated.

Low (up to \$999)

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Moderate (\$1,000 to \$9,999)

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High (\$10,000 to \$50,000)

Very High (Above \$50,000)

Disclaimer: The cost estimates provided are intended to be a guide. Project costs will vary depending on the size and nature of the project.

Time

* 1 to 3 months

Organizing an open house or open forum can take from one to three months. Identifying and reserving the location, as well as preparing the displays and materials for the event are generally the most time consuming aspect of organizing these types of events.

1 to 3 months

*

Disclaimer: The time estimates are approximations. The

6 months to a year
Multiyear

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duration of a project may vary depending on various factors,
including size and budget.

Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions

The following serve as recommended guidelines and suggestions for organizing an open house or an open forum hearing: 4

- **Determine whether an Open House or an Open Forum will be used.** The following are the main characteristics of each type of event:

Open House:

- a. Information is presented in a gallery-style, with booths displaying maps, photos, models, and documents
- b. Agency staff is present to answer questions or provide detailed information
- c. Events are scheduled so that people can drop in at their convenience
- d. Take-home materials, brochures, and maps are made available for participants
- e. Comment sheets are made available for people to write their opinions

Open Forum:

- a. Combines the Open House with a public hearing format
- b. People have an opportunity to review materials and express their opinions “on the record” during the public hearing portion of the event. In such events, the staff who are at the booths or board stations must take care to remind the public that they must formally record their comments if they want them to be part of the public record.
- c. Transcripts of comments are made available to interested people after the event
- d. Formal notice is provided to the public indicating the time of the open hearing discussion

- **Define the issues or projects and determine how the information will be presented.** Once an agency selects the topic or project for the event, it is possible to determine the type of information to be displayed, as well as the written, graphic and audio-visual materials that will be needed.
- **Designate an event coordinator.** The event coordinator will be responsible for overseeing all aspects of the event, including reserving a location, making sure the displays are clear and accurate, and ensuring there are sufficient handout materials for the public.
- **Set a date and time for the event.** The date and time of the event should be set to accommodate people who are employed during the day. It is recommended that such events be scheduled during weekday evenings or weekends. For example, an agency may have an open house from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., with two formal forums. The first forum scheduled at 4:30 p.m. and the second at 6:30 p.m. This would enable people with varying schedules to participate. When organizing such events, it is important to schedule the times based on the community.
- **Prepare materials for exhibits.** Agencies need to determine the types of material that they will use for the exhibits. This can include presentation boards, maps, and videos. Handouts can include fact sheets, brochures, pamphlets, or maps.
- Find a location for the event that is large enough to accommodate tables and displays and allows for comfortable traffic flow of people between areas. The facility should be easy to find, near public transit and accessible to persons with disabilities. If the event deals with broad issues or projects that encompass a large geographic area, then agencies should consider having the event at multiple locations.
- **Assign knowledgeable staff and provide a briefing to make sure they answer questions consistently.** Staff professionals who have specific areas of expertise should be scheduled to oversee exhibits related to their expertise. Technical experts or consultants may assist in the process. Prior to the event, a briefing should be given to all staff who will be participating in the event to ensure that consistent information is given to the public.
- **Make sure the room arrangements include places for the public to sit and rest, areas where they can access drinking water, and a location for taking oral testimony (if it is an open forum hearing).**
- **Clearly label each table and assign reception staff to greet and direct participants.** Reception staff can help to welcome people and inform them of how the event is organized. Some staff should be assigned to circulate, as this gives a chance to “relieve” others and observe proceedings.
- **Make space available for community viewpoints.** Stakeholders may request to display visual and written materials to make their viewpoints known. A space may be made available to display this information.
- **If the event is an open forum, establish a method for recording comments, and assign a public hearing officer to facilitate the discussion.**

- **Develop a media strategy for promoting the event.** Encourage the media and key stakeholders to attend. Agencies can use press releases, posters, mailings, and media announcements to disseminate the information. Such announcements should be sent at least two weeks in advance. It is also helpful to send reminders a few days before the event.

Recommended Demographics

Organizing an open house or open forum can take from one to three months. Identifying and reserving the location, as well as preparing the displays and materials for the event are generally the most time consuming aspect. Open house and open forum hearings help to enhance community outreach efforts. These types of events can be used among all demographics. However, the effectiveness of these events depends on how accessible the meetings are to the target demographic. In order to ensure participation, such events should be scheduled during evening and weekend hours in central locations that are accessible through various modes of transportation. Organizing these types of events.

Lessons Learned/Challenges

Below are key points to keep in mind when organizing an open house or an open forum hearing:⁵

- **An open house is a convenient place to conduct an informal survey.** Through a survey, an agency can obtain greater detail regarding community issues, needs, and perceptions. Participants can be given the opportunity to complete the survey at the event or they can be given the option of mailing back the survey.
- **Translators, translations of summaries, or bilingual staff can be used to assist non-English speaking residents to participate in events.**
- **Informal conversations with staff do not replace written comments.** People should be encouraged to present written comments, so that their opinions or viewpoints are formally on the record.
- **Residents do not get the opportunity to be heard by elected officials at an open house.** At traditional public hearings, elected leaders announce their views and provide the public an opportunity to provide comments. At an open house event, residents do not have the opportunity to formally present their opinions to public officials. Their interaction is with agency officials.

Case Studies

The Kansas City District of the Missouri Department of Transportation launched an interactive open house road show called “Your Voice in Transportation” in order to better inform the public of transportation issues and encourage their participation. Their goal was to help the public understand the importance of their input and to educate them about transportation projects and new initiatives. They held the open house “road show” at several locations and were able to attract wide public interest (<http://www.modot.mo.gov/kansascity/newrelease/District4News.shtml?action=displaySSI&newsId=29619><http://www.modot.mo.gov/kansascity/newrelease/District4News.shtml?action=displaySSI&newsId=29619>).⁶

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) hosted an informal open house event and a formal design public hearing regarding the relocation of NC 119 project. Residents were able to visit the open house prior to the public hearing. The public hearing portion of the event included formal presentations of the project schedule, location, design, and relocation requirements (<http://www.ncdot.org/projects/nc119relocation/>).⁷

For Further Information

Municipal Research Service Center (MRSC) of Washington: The site provides several case studies for the creative use of open house events, as well as other information on effective public participation strategies (<http://www.mrsc.org/subjects/governance/participation/effective.aspx#Convenient>).

Sources

¹ U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), “ USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses ,” August 2002, 29, FHWA, 17 August 2011 < <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pitt/content.htm> > .

² FHWA, “ Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses. ”

³ FHWA, “ Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses. ”

⁴ FHWA, “ Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses. ”

⁵ FHWA, " Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses. "

⁶ Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT), "MoDOT Takes Transportation to the Community in Richmond: Your Voice in Transportation Road Show Meets with Citizens about Transportation Issues," MoDOT, August 25 2011, <

<http://www.modot.mo.gov/kansascity/newrelease/District4News.shtml?action=displaySSI&newsId=29619>

<http://www.modot.mo.gov/kansascity/newrelease/District4News.shtml?action=displaySSI&newsId=29619> >.

⁷ North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), "NC 119 Relocation Project," NC DOT, 20 August 2011, <

<http://www.ncdot.org/projects/nc119relocation/> >.