

Transportation Outreach Planner

Demographics > Age > Seniors > Public Hearings

Public Outreach Strategies

Public Hearings

Quick Links

Toolbox Navigation

- [Recommended Target Groups](#)
- [Strategy Class](#)
- [Strategy Types](#)
- [Description](#)
- [Special Uses](#)
- [When to Use](#)
- [Cost](#)
- [Time](#)
- [Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions](#)
- [Lesson Learned/Challenges](#)
- [Case Studies](#)
- [For Further Information](#)
- [Sources](#)
- [Provide Feedback](#)

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

- Civic Engagement

Description

A public hearing is a formal meeting held before a governing board in which the public has the opportunity to express their opinions and comments regarding a policy or proposal. The role of the governing body is to consider those views prior to making a decision. The comments are made part of the public record and are made available to all interested parties. The Federal government requires most transportation projects to have public hearings. Below are the main requirements for public hearings: ¹

- The hearing must be open to the general public
- A public notice of the hearing must be published in a newspaper of general circulation announcing the date, time, location, and purpose of the hearing. The notice should also include an ADA statement indicating that the facility is accessible and provide contact information for sign language interpreters, assistive listening devices, or materials in accessible format.
- A public comment period must be provided prior to the hearing to give the public an opportunity to review the proposed action and submit written comments. Federal, state, or local requirements for length of comment period may vary, so it is important to review the requirements.
- Public comments must be made part of the public record.

Special Uses

Public Hearings can be used to: ²

- Establish a forum for public comments
- Provide a mechanism to assess public support or opposition to a project or policy
- Enable policy makers to hear public comments and concerns

When to Use

Some processes require at least two public hearings before a formal decision is made by the acting governing body. In such cases, the first hearing is held early in the process, and the public comments are used to help policy makers set the guiding principles or framework for the project, policy, or plan. The second hearing is held to discuss the final recommendations. This hearing serves as the last opportunity for the public to express their views before the governing board makes a final decision.

Cost

**** Moderate (\$1000 to \$9999)**

The cost of holding a public hearing is generally moderate. Expenses include newspaper advertising for the public notice, room rental, staff time, interpreter fees (including language translators, sign language interpreters, assistive listening devices, or materials in accessible format), duplication, and printing costs for handouts and displays. Newspaper advertising tends to represent the most expensive item of holding a public hearing. Agencies can reduce the cost of advertising by working with the newspaper to determine the most cost-effective options for meeting public notice requirements. Agencies should also avoid last minute submissions or edits, as these changes can be costly.

Low (up to \$999)

*

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

**

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

High (\$10,000 to \$50,000)	* * *	of the project.
Very High (Above \$50,000)	* * * *	

Time

* 1 to 3 months

Though a public hearing can be organized in a relatively short amount of time, sufficient time must be given for the public notice period. In most cases, agencies provide the public 30 days to review the items being considered and submit their comments. Time is also needed for staff to prepare the public hearing report and any other information or display that will be used at the hearing. As such, it can take one to three months to coordinate and hold a public hearing.

1 to 3 months	*	<i>Disclaimer:</i> The time estimates are approximations. The duration of a project may vary depending on various factors, including size and budget.
6 months to a year	* *	
Multiyear	* * *	

Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions

The following serve as recommended guidelines and suggestions for organizing a public hearing: ³

- **Prepare public hearing materials, announcements, and agendas, and distribute material ahead of time.** All public hearing materials should be prepared and disseminated to the governing board, agency officials, and key stakeholders prior to the hearing with sufficient time for them to review the material.
- **Ensure that materials are available for the public to inspect during the public comment period and that the instructions for submitting written comments are clear and easy to understand.** In most cases, the public is given 30 days, prior to the hearing, to review the hearing documents under consideration and provide written comments or questions. The public comment period is generally announced in a newspaper of general circulation and information is provided indicating how the public may be able to view or obtain the public hearing documents for review. Agencies should ensure that the documents are available at locations that the public can easily access and in accessible formats. Consideration should also be given to making the documents available during weekend and evening hours. Public libraries are often the best option. Agencies can also place the documents on-line in order to allow for greater accessibility.
- **Provide early notice and use various mediums to publicize the event.** Most federal, state, and local regulations require a public notice to be placed on a newspaper of general circulation at least 15 days prior to the hearing. However, such notification is generally not very effective in informing the general public. In order to increase awareness of the public hearing, agencies should send copies of the notice to public interest groups, community organizations, and other stakeholders. If the agency has sufficient resources, notices should also be placed on multiple media outlets, including ethnic, local, and multi-language media. In addition, agencies should include the notice on the agency's website for users to view.
- **Make arrangements for translation services and ensure that the meeting is accessible and can accommodate persons with disabilities.** Public announcements for the public hearing should indicate that translation services and assistance for persons with disabilities will be provided free of charge upon request. Prior to the meeting, agencies should review the following checklist to ensure accessibility to disabled persons and persons with limited English proficiency:⁴
 - Meeting location should be accessible to public transportation and should also have sufficient disabled parking.
 - Meeting areas must be free of obstructions to accommodate wheelchairs.
 - All notices should include a text telephone (TTY) number where people can request interpretation services.
 - If the meeting is videotaped arrangements should be made to have captioning or computer assisted note-taking services.
 - If possible, listening assistance services should be provided upon request. Such services may include: sign language interpreters, devices that amplify speakers' voices, and closed captioning (if the event is televised). Listening assisted devices may be rented.
 - A qualified interpreter should be asked to attend the hearing if members of the non-English speaking public are expected to attend.
- **Make sure sufficient time is set aside for all formal presentations and for public comments.** Depending on how many items are on the agenda and on how controversial an issue may be, agency staff should work closely with the public hearing officer to ensure that the item under consideration is given sufficient time to allow for formal presentations and public comments. In some cases, it may be necessary to re-arrange the formal agenda to

accommodate a public hearing that has a long list of people interested in speaking. For complicated or controversial items, agencies may also consider not scheduling any other item(s) on the agenda in order to dedicate ample time to the issue. Below is the typical process for most public hearings:

- Introduction by public hearing officer (the person who will be overseeing the meeting proceedings)
 - Report by agency staff to the governing body
 - Statement by project applicant or policy proponent
 - Opening of the public hearing
 - Rebuttals and closing statements
 - Questions to staff and applicant/proponent from the governing body
 - Decision of governing body
- **Ensure that the public hearing officer introduces the purpose of the meeting, describes the public hearing process, and outlines the rules for participation.** Prior to the public hearing, the agency should provide the public hearing officer with a prepared statement that explains the purpose of the meeting and how the hearing will be conducted. This information can also be made available in written form for the general public to review. At a minimum, the statement should explain the following:
 - The purpose of the hearing and the duration of the public comment period
 - The process for recognizing public speakers (most agencies require public speakers to sign up ahead of the hearing)
 - Time limits on public comments
 - Basic ground rules for participation
 - Availability of interpreter services
 - **For controversial or high publicity items prepare a communications strategy for explaining to the media the process and the results of the public hearing.** Agencies need to be prepared to answer media questions regarding controversial or high profile public hearing issues. This can include the following:
 - A formal statement from the agency regarding the public hearing outcome
 - A media fact sheet regarding the issue
 - A press conference (if necessary)
 - **Soon after the hearing make a transcript of the meeting available to the general public.** Agencies can post the transcript online to ensure the document is widely accessible. By making it easy for the public to find information on the public hearing, they are more likely to be engaged in the public involvement process.

Recommended Target Demographics

Public hearings can be used among all demographic groups. However, the effectiveness of these types of meetings as an outreach technique depends on how well the meetings are publicized and on the accessibility of the meetings to the target demographic. Since most public hearings are held in government buildings on weekdays during working hours, persons who are unable to get off work or who may have limited transportation options may not be able to attend. As such, those who must often participate in such meetings are professionals in the field, community activists, and persons with flexible schedules. In order to ensure greater participation from a broader demographic, agencies should work with their local governing boards to schedule such meetings during evening or weekend hours and at locations that are accessible to the public through various modes of transportation.

Lessons Learned/Challenges

Below are key points to keep in mind when holding a public hearing:

- **Public hearings need to be combined with other public involvement activities in order to provide the public various opportunities for participation throughout the process.** Public hearings should not be the only mechanism provided to the public to express their views, as such meetings are generally held at the end of the process. When this happens the public feel that their concerns cannot be addressed because they are heard too late in the final decision process.⁴
- **Large formal hearings may be intimidating and some people may restrain from expressing their comments.** Agencies need to provide the public with various ways of submitting their formal comments. For example, comments can be received in writing during the hearing and a staff person can read the comments into the record on behalf of the interested party.⁵
- **Agencies need to better publicize events.** Agencies can achieve this by sending notices regarding the public

hearing to community groups and interested stakeholders. They can also include the information on free community calendars.⁶

- **Attendance and participation at public hearings can be improved by combining formal public hearings with open house events (also known as open forum hearings).**⁷
- **Agencies can help people to better understand how the public hearing process works by creating a simple guide that explains the process and how the public can participate.**⁸

Case Studies

The Texas Department of Transportation conducted a study of the public involvement activities and the effectiveness of their public hearing process. The study provided recommendations for using internet technology to improve public involvement and ways enhance the public hearing process, including the use of open forum hearings. The study discusses how the Georgia DOT successfully used open forum hearings for most of its projects (<http://tti.tamu.edu/documents/1875-S.pdf>).

The Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies, in cooperation with the University of Vermont and the Planning Commissioners Journal, developed a guide for public hearings and public meetings. The guide provides information on how planning commissions can best make use of hearings as vehicles of citizen participation in the municipal planning process (<http://www.uvm.edu/extension/community/fs176-2.pdf>).

For Further Information

The following serve as useful guides for coordinating public hearings and improving attendance:

- How to Improve Public Involvement in Your Next Public Hearing: http://www.techtransfer.berkeley.edu/newsletter/07-4/public_involvement.php⁹
- Improving Meeting Attendance: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/impromtg.htm>¹⁰
- Getting the Most Out of Public Hearings: <http://www.ca-ilg.org/publichearings>¹¹

Sources

1 U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), "USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Public Meetings/Hearings," August 2002, 29, FHWA, 17 August 2011 (<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/contents.htm>).

2 FHWA, "Public Meetings/Hearings."

3 Amsler, Terry with JoAnne Speers, "Getting The Most Out Of Public Hearings: Ideas To Improve Public Involvement," Institute for Local Government and the California League of Cities, 20 December 2011, (<http://www.ca-ilg.org/publichearings>).

4 FHWA, "Public Meetings/Hearings."

5 FHWA, "Public Meetings/Hearings."

6 Amsler, Terry with JoAnne Speers, "Getting The Most Out Of Public Hearings: Ideas To Improve Public Involvement."

7 Gilliland, Cynthia A. Weatherby, "An Assessment of Public Involvement Strategies: Summary Report," The Texas Transportation Institute, 20 December 2011, (<http://tti.tamu.edu/documents/1875-S.pdf>).

8 Sawyer, Will and Fred Schmidt, "Citizen Participation Strategies for Municipal Planning in Vermont: PUBLIC MEETINGS AND HEARINGS," 2004, University of Vermont, 20 December 2011, (<http://www.uvm.edu/extension/community/fs176-2.pdf>).

9 "How to Improve Public Involvement in your Next Public Hearing," Fall 2007 Tech Transfer Newsletter, ITS Berkeley, 20 December 2011, (http://www.techtransfer.berkeley.edu/newsletter/07-4/public_involvement.php).

10 FHWA, "USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Improving Meeting Attendance," August 2002, 29, FHWA, 20 December 2011, (<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/impromtg.htm>).

11 Amsler, Terry with JoAnne Speers, "Getting The Most Out Of Public Hearings: Ideas To Improve Public Involvement."