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Public Meetings: Barriers and Solutions

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The Effectiveness of Public Meetings as a Form of Participation in Local Government

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Public meetings and hearings are some of the most common avenues of interaction between government officials and the public. In many circumstances, they are a legally required element of the public involvement process. However, elected officials, government staff, and residents often find public meetings to be frustrating, unrepresentative, and ineffective (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2016; McComas et al, 2007; Walters et al, 2000). This has prompted many planners to employ other, more nontraditional methods of public participation in order to gain meaningful feedback and build relationships with residents. Though these newer methods, which include workshops, tours, and charrettes, are often more effective than traditional public meetings (King, Feltey, and Susel, 1998), they have not completely replaced meetings as the default participation technique. This means that it is still important to understand the role and effectiveness of public meetings and to work to make them as useful as possible within the existing public involvement framework.

This report analyzes public meetings and hearings based on prior research and interviews with local government staff and provides recommendations. It is organized into four parts. Part 1 explores the role of public meetings and hearings and provides background information, including definitions, purposes, and legal requirements. Part 2 focuses on the effectiveness of meetings and hearings as a form of public participation based on existing literature. This includes discussion of the types of participation, patterns of attendance at meetings, and usefulness of meetings. Part 3 consists of case studies of three cities in Washington, including the results of interviews with each of the cities' planning and community engagement staff. Part 4 explores the factors that make meetings more successful and recommends actions that planners can take to improve the outcomes of meetings.

Part 1: The Role of Public Meetings

Part 1 of this report provides background information about public meetings and hearings, including definitions, purposes, and legal requirements.

Definitions and Distinctions

This report focuses on public involvement in local government. Yang and Pandey (2011) argue that public involvement is different than political participation. Political participation includes activities such as voting or campaigning for elected officials, while public involvement involves the public interfacing with government officials. Based on this definition, public meetings and hearings are examples of involvement rather than political participation because they allow government officials and the public to communicate directly with one another. However, the phrase "public participation" can describe specific methods that contribute to public involvement, such as public meetings.

To understand the different forms that public involvement takes, it is helpful to draw a distinction between the two general types of planning: current planning and long range planning. Current planning involves specific, individual projects. Planners who focus on current planning work with project proposals and permits, such as those for residential or commercial development. Long range planning involves overarching plans. Planners who focus on long range planning work with documents like comprehensive plans, transportation plans, and downtown plans and make decisions about zoning and other city-wide or county-wide regulations. Both current planners and long range planners use participation techniques, including public meetings and hearings.

Though this report discusses both public meetings and public hearings, there are important differences between the two. Public meetings are meetings of any government body. This includes city council meetings and planning commission meetings. In Washington, the Open Public Meetings Act of 1971 requires that any meeting of a public agency or government body is open to the public. Public hearings are held specifically to allow the public to comment on a particular action or project. These can be part of public meetings or occur all on their own (MRSC, 2018).

The Role of the Public in Government

Public involvement is an important and often legally required part of government, especially in the planning process. There are many purposes for public involvement, and it can take many different forms depending on those purposes.

The Importance of Public Involvement
Public involvement is an important element of a healthy government system and an effective planning and decision-making process. It is particularly valuable because it increases accountability, legitimacy, consensus, and trust in government. It also results in better decisions.

Burby (2003) finds that participation methods that involve stakeholders from a broad set of groups result in stronger plans with a higher chance of ultimately being implemented. In particular, involving property owners and environmental groups results in stronger plans.

Burby (2003) also writes that, beyond resulting in better plans, public involvement is important because of the following principles, which are some of the main ideas behind the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) code of ethics:
- Fairness and equity
- Residents' rights to be informed about and consulted on governmental decisions
- Disadvantaged groups' rights to have their interests represented in the decision-making process

Ideally, any effective method of public participation should be designed to meet these main goals.

However, typical participation methods often fail to meet these goals. For example, Michels and De Graaf (2010) find that, practically speaking, public participation does not always contribute to the ultimate decisions that governments make. They also find that the participation process excludes some groups of people. Burby (2003) found that, in local governments in Washington and Florida, the groups of stakeholders that are most represented in the planning process are:
1. Business groups
2. Local elected officials
3. Development groups
4. Local government departments
5. Neighborhood groups
6. Media representatives

Further, some of the least represented stakeholder groups are environmental groups, affordable housing groups, and senior citizen groups. In fact, "groups representing disadvantaged people living in hazardous areas" are the least represented out of all stakeholder groups (Burby, 2003, p. 39). Part 2 of this report discusses, in detail, the issue of representation in public meetings.

Despite these serious problems, Michels and De Graaf (2010) argue that involvement is still important because it:
- Makes residents feel more responsibility
- Encourages residents to listen to and understand the opinions of others
- Makes decisions more legitimate

Purposes of Public Involvement
Though all forms of public participation meet (or should meet) the same goals, individual methods of participation have more specific purposes. Walters, Aydelotte, and Miller (2000) write that the purposes of public participation in decision-making processes fall into the following categories:
- Discovery of alternatives and definitions
- Education of the public about issues or proposed projects
- Measurement of public opinion about issues or proposed projects
- Persuasion of the public toward a particular project alternative

- Legitimization of decisions through compliance with legal requirements

Public meetings and hearings can have purposes in any of those categories. For example, some scoping meetings aim to discover areas of interest for assessing a project's impacts, educate the public about the proposed project, and comply with legal requirements (Walters, Aydelotte, and Miller, 2000).

Of course, the public has specific purposes for getting involved in government as well. These purposes influence the ways that the public participates. Adams (2004) finds that residents influence policy at public meetings by:
- Providing information about their opinions to government officials
- Showing support for particular elected officials
- Shaming or criticizing elected officials
- Setting the future agenda
- Delaying decisions
- Networking and communicating among themselves

Legal Requirements

Though public involvement in government processes is important for its own sake, planners and decision-makers must allow for some level of involvement based on certain federal or state policy. The following section explains some of the participation requirements laid out in specific federal and state laws.

Federal Policy
Administrative Procedure Act (APA)
Congress enacted the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) in 1946. The APA contains procedures that federal agencies must follow when creating regulations; some of these procedures are intended to promote public participation in rulemaking. The APA requires federal agencies to publicly post notice of a proposed regulation, allow the public to comment on the proposed regulation, and respond to significant comments (Garvey, 2017). Though the APA applies only to federal agencies, some states have similar acts in place. Washington State, for example, has its own Administrative Procedure Act (RCW 34.05), which outlines rule-making procedures for state agencies. Like the federal APA, Washington's APA requires state agencies to publish a notice of the proposed rule, accept public comments on the rule, and facilitate a rulemaking hearing that is open to the public.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)
The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) became a law in 1970. It requires federal agencies to identify and assess any environmental impacts of proposed actions by preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for that action. These actions include (1) projects directly proposed by a federal agency and (2) decisions that federal agencies make on permit applications for private projects (EPA, n.d.).

NEPA requires public participation at specific times in the environmental impact assessment process. These include the scoping period at the beginning of the analysis and the time after the agency publishes a draft document for public comment. The scoping period allows members of the public to comment on the scope of issues that the EIS should address. Agencies use one of several methods for public comment in the scoping process including public meetings, formal hearings, informal workshops, and written comments. After the agency publishes a Draft EIS, the public has 45 days to submit comments, which can be in writing or at public meetings (EPA, n.d.).

Some states, including Washington, have legislation similar to NEPA that applies to state agencies. The State Policy section below discusses Washington's State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) in detail.

State Policy
Some states also have laws that require public involvement in some form. Several states have growth management acts, some of which regulate public involvement to some extent. Brody, Godschalk, and Burby (2003) found that Washington, Oregon, Maryland, and Vermont's Growth Management Acts have the strongest public participation requirements.

Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA)
In 1990, Washington State adopted its Growth Management Act (GMA), which governs the comprehensive plans of many cities and counties in Washington. Brody, Godschalk, and Burby (2003) find that Washington's GMA participation requirements increased the level of attention that local governments in the state pay to participation.

The GMA applies to "fast-growing" counties and any other counties that have chosen to opt-in. Twenty-eight of Washington's 39 counties are required to or have chosen to plan fully under the GMA. These planning counties contain around 95% of the population of Washington and include Whatcom, King, and Pierce County (MRSC, 2019). The GMA contains 14 goals that guide planning counties' and cities' comprehensive plans. The following sections of the GMA relate to public participation in some way:

- Goal 11 (RCW 36.70A.020)
  Goal 11 is "citizen participation and coordination." This goal guides communities to encourage public involvement in the planning process.

- Public participation-- Notice provisions (RCW 36.70A.035)
  This section of the GMA requires notice provisions as a method of public participation, requiring local governments to notify "property owners and other affected and interested" parties about proposed changes to regulation. These notice provisions can include a posting on the property in question, a notice in the newspaper or regional journal, directly notifying interest groups, or sending a notice to a mailing list.

This section also requires that the city or county council provides an opportunity for public review and comment before voting on changes to the comprehensive plan or any development regulations.

- Comprehensive plans-- ensure public participation (RCW 36.70A.140)
  This section requires that planning counties and cities create a program that identifies "procedures providing for early and continuous public participation" while developing comprehensive plans or development regulations. These procedures must include:
  - "Broad dissemination" of project proposals and their alternatives
  - Opportunities for individuals to send written comments
  - Public meetings
  - Effective notice before public meetings are held
  - Opportunities for open public discussion
  - Communication programs
  - Information services
  - Governmental response to public comments

State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA)

Washington's State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) requires state and local government agencies in Washington to identify and analyze the environmental impacts of projects. Like NEPA, SEPA requires agencies to involve the public during two phases of the environmental impact assessment process:

- Scoping
  The scoping period occurs towards the beginning of the environmental impact assessment process. It allows the public, agencies, and tribal nations to identify the alternatives, impacted areas, and mitigation strategies that the Environmental Impact Statement should consider.

  SEPA requires agencies to hold written comment periods during the scoping period. Agencies are not required to respond to these comments, but many choose to create scoping documents that summarize the comments and respond to them.

- Draft Environmental Impact Statement
  After preparing a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), the government agency in charge publishes it for public review. SEPA requires a 30-day comment period for the DEIS, during which members of the public can submit written comments to the agency. If at least 50 people who would be impacted by the proposed project make a written request, the agency must also hold a public hearing. Agencies must respond to these comments in the final Environmental Impact Statement.

However, SEPA encourages agencies to go beyond the requirements and use other methods to promote public participation (White, 2003).

Washington Administrative Code (WAC 365-196-600)

This section of the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) governs public participation in the comprehensive planning and development regulation planning process. This section includes requirements that communities *must* follow, as well as recommendations that they *can* follow in order to meet the requirements.

- Requirements
    - "Establish procedures for early and continuous public participation"
    - Broadly disseminate proposals
    - Allow for written comments, public meetings, open discussion, and governmental consideration of comments
    - Provide timely, reasonably available notice to interested parties

- Recommendations
    - Create a public participation plan
    - Involve the public in the comprehensive plan visioning process
    - Include the role of the planning commission in the public participation plan
    - Involve groups of community members that are not typically involved in planning
    - Ensure that any interested individual or group can participate
    - Consider many options for communication, including traditional and non-traditional methods
    - Provide an opportunity for comments from the public
        - Hold public meetings or workshops throughout the community
        - Hold public hearings before presenting the final draft of an amendment
        - Create opportunities for written comments at every stage of the planning process
        - Make sure that meetings and hearings are free and open to the public. Make sure that every person who wants to speak has the opportunity to speak
    - Make sure that involvement is continuous
        - Create a written document with a summary of public comments and a response
        - Consider holding more meetings at the end of the public comment period to consider and discuss the comments

Open Public Meetings Act

The Washington State legislature enacted the Open Public Meetings Act in 1971 to ensure that the public can maintain control of the government by being informed about government entities' deliberations and actions. This act requires that all meetings and actions of governing bodies, including the councils and commissions of cities, counties, and special purpose districts, be open to the public to attend. These meetings include workshops, study sessions, and retreats, as long as the governing body takes any action involving official business. Though governing bodies often allow the public to comment during meetings, the Open Public Meetings Act does not require it (Meinig, 2016).

Part 2: The Effectiveness of Public Meetings

Part 1 of this report explains that public participation is a necessary part of government. In line with this need for participation, federal and state law requires public meetings in certain circumstances. However, public meetings tend not to be the best way to encourage meaningful participation. Part 2 of this report examines the effectiveness of public meetings as a form of public participation based on the existing literature.

Generally, the types of public meetings that governments often hold are informative or consultative. They allow governments to spread information to the public and, sometimes, to gather input from the public. These meetings tend to focus on one-way communication rather than creating a dialogue or partnership between the public and the government (Arnstein, 1969; IAP2, 2018; Gastil and Kelshaw, 2008).

Meetings also tend to be unrepresentative of the communities they take place in. Meeting attendees tend to be white, older, wealthy, homeowners, highly educated, longtime residents, and already involved in government (Einstein et al, 2018; Hajnal and Trounstine, 2016; Adams, 2004). This is a problem because unrepresentative meetings lead to decisions and policies that do not reflect public input and are biased and unfair.

Overall, many researchers and planners agree that public meetings and hearings tend to be ineffective because they take place too late in the decision-making process, there are barriers that prevent people from attending, communication is rarely a dialogue, residents do not trust that their input will influence decisions, and attendees are not representative of the community.

Types of participation

In general, public participation can take many forms, and the goals and effectiveness of different techniques can vary drastically. Several researchers, philosophers, and organizations have developed methods of categorizing these different types of participation.

One of the first, and most well-known, authors to categorize participation was Sherry R. Arnstein. In 1969, Arnstein published the influential article, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," in which she discusses eight different types of participation (and nonparticipation), arranged as the rungs of a ladder (see Table 1). The two lowest rungs in Arnstein's ladder are manipulation and therapy. Arnstein argues that these methods are forms of nonparticipation because their true objectives are to educate or gain support from the public rather than to genuinely seek public input. The next three rungs are informing, consultation, and placation, which Arnstein considers to be degrees of tokenism. These methods give residents a chance to listen and to use their voice, but those in power do not guarantee that the public's voice will actually influence policy. The top three rungs of the ladder are partnership, delegated power, and citizen control, which Arnstein classifies as degrees of citizen power. These rungs give residents the most power in decision-making.

Table 1: Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969)

Degree of Participation	Rung	Examples
Citizen power	8. Citizen control	Resident groups that have direct access to funds
	7. Delegated power	Policy boards where residents have the most seats and have concrete authority
	6. Partnership	Joint policy boards and planning committees, especially when resident groups have funding to hire their own leaders, lawyers, and technicians
Tokenism	5. Placation	Placing a few residents on boards and commissions; creating residents' advisory committees that have little concrete authority
	4. Consultation	Public hearings, attitude surveys
	3. Informing	Common tools of one-way communication (pamphlets, newspapers, posters); meetings that discourage questions and only share technical, surface-level information
Nonparticipation	2. Therapy	Activities that ask residents to change or "cure" themselves rather than changing the system
	1. 1. Manipulation	Citizen Advisory Committees; neighborhood advisory groups without legitimate power

Public meetings can fit in several different rungs of Arnstein's ladder, depending on the particular circumstances. Typical public meetings, such as city council or planning commission meetings, and public hearings are often forms of informing (rung 3) and consultation (rung 4). They either share technical information with attendees or receive feedback with no promise of follow-through.

In 1998, King, Feltey, and Susel published an article that separates participation methods into just two categories: authentic and inauthentic. Inauthentic participation is solely symbolic; public input does not actually impact the issue at hand. This is because the issue is framed so that the administrator, constrained by the administrative processes in place, is more centered around the issue than the public is (see Figure 1). On the other hand, authentic participation allows the public to influence the issue through sincere and continuous involvement. Authentic participation reframes the issue so that the public is closest to the issue, with administrators acting as a bridge between the public and the administrative processes.
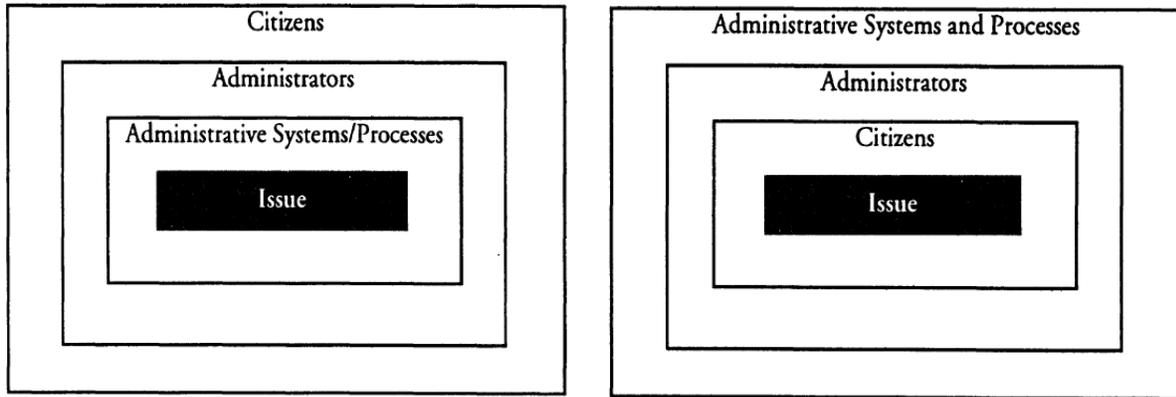
Figure 1: The framing of issues under inauthentic participation (left); the framing of issues under authentic participation (right) (King, Feltey, and Susel, 1998)

Typical public meetings tend to be forms of inauthentic participation. Especially in current planning, residents are further from the issue than government officials are. Officials must follow the regulations that prescribe participation methods, making the residents' involvement more symbolic than useful.

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), a nonprofit that advocates for improved public participation, released a spectrum of public participation, where each category has a different level of impact on the ultimate decision (see Table 2). These categories are: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower.

Table 2: IAP2's spectrum of public participation (IAP2, 2018)

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Goal	To give the public balanced information and help them understand the situation	To get public feedback	To work directly with the public and to understand and consider public concerns	To partner with the public during each part of the process	To give the public the power to make the final decision

Under this framework, the types of participation that involve residents the most are those that allow for a consistent dialogue between the public and the government throughout the entire process and that give residents meaningful power to influence, or even make the final decision. Like in Arnstein's ladder, this spectrum categorizes public meetings as informing or consulting. Meetings allow for communication in which the government gives the public information and the public may provide feedback to the government.

Types of public meetings

Public meetings and hearings are a very specific form of public participation. The frameworks of participation in the previous section tend to place public meetings into just one or two categories. However, not all meetings are the same; they can serve different purposes and function in different ways. Some are simply informative, while others are collaborative. Some involve communication in only one direction, while others are dialogues.

In 2008, Gastil and Kelshaw published a typology for categorizing the types of public meetings (Table 3). In this framework, the type of meeting depends on the initiator of the meeting, the direction of communication, and the content and purpose of the communication. Vicarious and informational meetings simply communicate information to the public or to the government. Advisory and consultive meetings communicate values (this includes opinions and judgements) to the public or to the government. Grassroots, invitational, and collaborative meetings are all dialogues; they involve the government and the public communicating between each other to share and discuss information, opinions, judgements, and ideas.

Table 3: Gastil and Kelshaw's typology of public meetings (Gastil and Kelshaw, 2008)

Meeting Type	Direction of Communication (initiator shown in bold)	Purpose of Communication
Vicarious	Government → **Public**	Gathering Information
Informational	**Government** → Public	Distributing Information
Advisory	**Public** → Government	Expressing Values
Consultive	Public → **Government**	Gathering Values
Grassroots	Government ← → **Public**	Setting Agenda, Influencing Policy
Invitational	**Government** ← → Public	Building Public Commitment and Government Legitimacy
Collaborative	**Government** ← → **Public**	Combining Information/Values/Ideas to Make Decisions

Again, in this typology, typical public meetings and hearings fall under the category of informational or consultive. Governments hold public meetings, such as city council meetings or planning commission meetings, to share information with residents, and although there is an opportunity for public comment, participation is not the main purpose of the meeting. Typical public hearings, such as those required as part of the SEPA process, give residents the opportunity to comment on a particular project, but the discussion at the hearing itself is one-way, not a dialogue. Depending on the type of hearing, the government must respond to these comments, but not at the hearing itself.

However, Gastil and Kelshaw's typology differs from those that categorize all participation techniques because it introduces the possibility of public meetings that go beyond informing or consulting. Meetings that fall into the categories of grassroots, invitational, or collaborative allow for dialogue between the government and the public.

Who attends public meetings?

One important consideration that determines the effectiveness of public meetings is representation. It is important that the attendees of public meetings are representative of their communities because it results in better decisions (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2016).

However, researchers have found that attendees tend not to be representative of their communities. Meeting attendees, and those who participate in politics in general, tend to be white, older, wealthy, homeowners, highly educated, longtime residents, and have very strong views on the issue at hand (Einstein et al, 2018; Hajnal and Trounstine, 2016; Adams, 2004). Generally, the most important predictor of who participates is socioeconomic status, which depends on education level and income (Williamson, 2014).

This lack of representation is a problem because resulting policies may be biased and unfair, particularly for residents in already disadvantaged groups (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2016). Additionally, when participation strategies are not representative, it is less likely that participants' input will influence the government's ultimate decision because government officials can ignore comments based on the excuse that they are unrepresentative (Yang and Pandey, 2011; Adams, 2004). Further, when meetings are unrepresentative and residents view them as unfair, they can lose trust in government authorities and the planning process in general (McComas et al, 2007).

However, the representativeness of participation depends on the particular situation. Williamson (2014) found that, in public meetings focusing on federal block grant spending in Hillsborough County, Florida, black residents and lower-income residents were more likely to participate. Williamson hypothesizes that this greater turnout may have occurred because the main purpose of the spending discussed in the meetings is to benefit low-income neighborhoods. It may also have occurred because county staff and local nonprofits actively encouraged attendance at these meetings by mobilizing low-income residents and residents of color. This indicates that it is possible to hold public meetings that are representative of communities and that deliberately include typically underrepresented residents.

Why do people attend public meetings? Why don't they?

Public meetings tend to be unrepresentative because there are barriers in place that keep some residents from attending. King, Feltey, and Susel (1998) found that the barriers that prevent residents from attending public meetings fall into three general categories:
1. The nature of day-to-day life

These barriers include the difficulty to find the time, childcare, or transportation necessary to attend meetings. These barriers are especially significant for residents who work multiple jobs or work in the evenings and would have to take time away from work (which is often financially difficult) to attend these meetings.

2. Administrative processes
   Many residents find that the government system itself blocks participation, especially any input that challenges the existing system. Governments often limit the ways that people can participate by being overly controlling of the timeline and direction of communication. Often, residents are aware that their only opportunity to participate is so late in the decision-making process that public feedback would not make a difference.

3. Participation techniques
   The structure of traditional public meetings makes it difficult for residents to effectively participate. Meetings generally allow residents to speak for only a few minutes, and do not require meaningful feedback or follow-up from city officials. Again, these hearings tend to happen too late in the process for decisions to change. Other techniques, like panels and surveys can be unhelpful because they do not allow for interaction between residents and city officials and may still exclude some groups of residents more than others.

Of course, despite the many barriers that prevent residents from attending public meetings, some residents still choose to attend and some choose to make comments. McComas (2003) suggests several possible reasons for attending public meetings and hearings:

- To learn about the project
- To learn about other community members' opinions of the project
- To support friends or neighbors
- To feel that they have at least "done their civic duty" (p. 110)
- To feel that they have some control over the situation
- To serve a "ritualistic purpose" (p. 110)

Again, meeting attendance does, to some extent, depend on the particular situation. For example, Yang and Pandey (2011) found that certain areas of government that warrant involvement (planning and parks and recreation) are more supportive of effective public participation than other, more technical areas (budgeting, public works, human resources, and economic development).

Do public meetings work?

Planners, elected officials, and residents often view public meetings as ineffective forms of participation.

Walters, Aydelotte, and Miller (2000) write that decision makers and experts tend to think of public participation as problematic for several reasons:
- Officials view issues as too complicated for the public
- Experts view the slow, incremental decision-making process as irrational and inefficient
- Officials believe that the public is not interested or selfishly interested in issues
- Officials are uncomfortable sharing power with the public and redefining their own roles in the decision-making process
- Officials find public participation to be time-consuming and resource-intensive

Members of the public also find that typical meetings and hearings are problematic. In a study of two public hearings regarding a proposed landfill, McComas (2003) found that the vast majority of participants did not believe that their comments would matter or that those in charge of the proposed project genuinely cared about their comments. The study also found that, among people who attended the public hearings, only one third felt comfortable sharing a comment. The participants who felt comfortable making a comment tended to be those who felt that most of the people in attendance had similar opinions. Further, the majority of participants had low expectations of the public hearing, possibly because it occurred towards the end of the proposed project's decision-making process.

Many researchers agree that public meetings do not promote meaningful participation in decision-making processes. King, Feltey, and Susel (1998) argue that traditional methods of public participation are not effective because they tend to be forms of inauthentic participation. This is because, traditionally, participation happens too late in the decision-making process to have any impact, administrators rely on their technical expertise rather than sharing information with residents, and the only power that residents have is to block administrators rather than partnering with them.

Further, in a review of the literature around public hearings, Baker, Addams, and Davis (2005), find that public hearings are ineffective because:
- Administrators often follow the bare legal minimum rather than intending to have meaningful hearings
- Hearings often take place at inaccessible times and locations
- Hearings often take place too late in the planning process to result in any meaningful public influence. This makes these hearings more conflictual because residents are in a position where they must be reactive, rather than cooperative.
- Communication at public hearings tends to be one-way, not a cooperative dialogue
- Residents do not trust government officials and do not believe that they really care about public opinion

- Residents may not be interested in public issues
- Residents may feel alienated by the media's representation of issues

However, some researchers argue that, despite their drawbacks, public meetings can be useful elements of government systems. Ebdon and Franklin (2006) found that public meetings are not effective at allowing residents to directly influence decisions, but that they can be useful for sharing preliminary information early in the decision-making process. Adams (2004) argues that, though public meetings do not effectively allow residents to deliberate policy or influence officials, they are useful at increasing residents' political power and improving government responses.

Part 3: Case Studies

In order to understand the role of public participation in real-world public meetings, it is helpful to consider the experience of specific communities. Part 3 of this report considers three differently sized cities in Washington: Tacoma (large), Bellingham (medium), and Newcastle (small).

Introduction to Case Study Communities

Figure 2 shows the location of each of the three case study communities. This section will introduce each city in terms of demographics and governmental system.

Figure 2: A map of the three case study communities within Washington.

Tacoma, WA
Demographics
Tacoma is the third largest city in Washington state with 213,000 residents (Tacoma City Manager's Office, 2017). Tacoma's largest employers are Joint Base Lewis-McChord, MultiCare Health System, and Washington State (Tacoma Major Employers, 2017). Table 4 shows the racial composition of Tacoma. The median per capita income is $29,420. Seventeen percent of residents are considered to live in poverty. Half of houses are owner occupied, indicating that 50% of Tacoma's homes are rentals. Additional characteristics of the population include that 19% of people speak a language other than English at home; 78% of households have internet access; and 88% of adults have a high school degree, while 28% of adults have a college degree (US Census Bureau).

Table 4: The racial composition of Tacoma, WA (US Census Bureau)

Race	Percent of Population
White	66.0
Black or African American	9.9
American Indian and Alaska Native	1.3
Asian	8.8
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	1.3
Two or More Races	8.5
Hispanic or Latino	11.6

Government System
Tacoma has a Council-Manager government system. The City Council has nine elected members, including the Mayor, who each serve for four years (Tacoma City Council, 2017). Beyond the City Council, Tacoma has 28 other boards and commissions, including a planning commission, a commission on disabilities, commission on immigrant and refugee affairs, and housing authority (Tacoma Committees, 2017).

Tacoma's planning commission has nine volunteer members that serve three year terms. City Council appoints one member for each of Tacoma's five council districts. City Council appoints the other four members from groups that represent developers, the environment, transportation, and architecture or historic preservation (Tacoma Planning Commission, 2017).

Bellingham, WA
Demographics
Bellingham has 88,500 residents, making it the largest city in Whatcom County and the 12th largest city in Washington (About Bellingham, n.d.; 2018 Population Trends, 2018). Its two largest employers are PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center and Western Washington University (Abjornsen, 2018). The median per capita income is $27,209; 22% of Bellingham residents are considered to live in poverty (US Census Bureau). Table 5 shows the racial composition of Bellingham. Just under half (45%) of homes are owner occupied, indicating that over half of Bellingham homes are rentals. Additional characteristics of the population include that 13% of residents speak a language other than English at home; 85% of households have internet access; and 94% of adults have a high school degree, while 43% have a college degree (US Census Bureau).

Table 5: The racial composition of Bellingham, WA (US Census Bureau)

Race	Percent of Population
White	82.6
Black or African American	1.5
American Indian and Alaska Native	1.6
Asian	6.2
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.2
Two or More Races	5.2
Hispanic or Latino	8.3

Government System
Bellingham has a "strong-Mayor, weak-Council" government system. Bellingham City Council is made up of seven elected council members; six are elected by representative districts and the seventh is elected as an at-large councilmember (About Bellingham, n.d.; Government, n.d.). Outside of City Council, Bellingham has 18 other boards and commissions. These range from a library board of trustees to a neighborhood advisory commission. Seven of these boards and commissions fall under the category of planning and community development. Members of these boards advise or make decisions relating to the arts, community development, design review, historic preservation, planning and development, shorelines, and tourism (Boards and Commissions, n.d.)

Newcastle, WA
Demographics
As of 2017, Newcastle had 11,681 residents. The most common employment sectors among Newcastle residents are professional, scientific, and technical services, health care and social assistance, and retail trade (Data USA, n.d.). The median per capita income is $60,857; 5% of Newcastle residents are considered to live in poverty. Table 6 shows the racial composition of Newcastle. Roughly three-quarters (77%) of homes are owner occupied, indicating that around one-quarter of Newcastle homes are rentals. Additional characteristics of the population include that 34% of residents speak a language other than English at home; 93% of households have internet access; and 99% of adults have a high school degree, while 69% have a college degree (US Census Bureau).

Table 6: The racial composition of Newcastle, WA (US Census Bureau)

Race	Percent of Population
White	62.6
Black or African American	2.9
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.1
Asian	28.6
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.0
Two or More Races	4.9
Hispanic or Latino	3.5

Government System
Newcastle has a Council-Manager government system. The City Manager, who oversees the day-to-day operations of the city, is appointed by councilmembers. There are seven elected council members who serve four year terms. The councilmembers elect a Mayor and Deputy Mayor from among themselves every two years. The Mayor runs City Council meetings and acts as a representative of the Council at events. The City Council meets twice a month at City Hall and is open to the public. In addition to regular Council meetings, Newcastle hosts a Town Hall meeting each year, where residents can directly communicate with Councilmembers (The Newcastle City Council, n.d.).
Outside of City Council, Newcastle has two other commissions: a Planning Commission and a Community Activities Commission. These commissions each meet once a month and are open to the public (City Meetings, n.d.).

Interview Findings

This section describes the results of interviews conducted with staff from each of the three case study communities. The interviews include discussion of the participation techniques that each city's planners commonly use, the role of public meetings in the city's participation techniques, and the effectiveness of public meetings in the city.

Overall, public meetings at each of the case study communities tend to have low attendance, except for meetings that focus on controversial topics. The people who attend these meetings tend not to be representative of the community as a whole. Rather, they tend to be older, already engaged in other areas of local government, and/or live close to proposed projects. All of the staff interviewed find that public meetings are not as useful as other participation techniques (such as small workshops or on-site activities) at promoting effective participation. This is because traditional

public meetings can be difficult for many residents to attend and occur too late in the planning process to result in substantial changes. However, they all also find that city staff do not have enough time or resources to use these more effective techniques for every project.

The following sections discuss, in more detail, the results of the interviews for each of the three communities.

Tacoma, WA

In a phone interview, a current planner from the City of Tacoma discussed the role and effectiveness of common participatory techniques in the city's current planning process. In general, current planning has a more rigid participatory structure than long range planning. Legally, the permitting process requires specific timelines for public comment. Certain types of permits only require public notices, but allow planners the option of holding a public meeting. Other, more major permits, require a public hearing. For projects that go through the SEPA process, the public has several opportunities to make comments.

The attendance at Tacoma's project-specific public meetings and hearings varies based on the project at hand. Most of the time, it is rare for more than one person to attend a meeting. Meetings that discuss conditional use permits tend to have better attendance; they may have 10-20 attendees, who are generally immediate neighbors of the proposal. For Tacoma's more controversial projects, such as those involving fossil fuel industry developments, 40 or 50 people may attend. Because attendance at these types of meetings tends to be low, the attendees are not representative of the city as a whole. Even when attendance is higher, the attendees tend to represent residents of just the closest neighborhoods or people who are particularly invested in the topic, not the entire city.

The common types of participation for Tacoma's current planning projects, including public meetings and hearings and written comments, tend to be relatively ineffective in changing the projects. Excluding comments that are questions about the project, around three-quarters of the comments under SEPA are statements about the commenter not liking the project without any reasoning. These types of comments are not useful to Tacoma planners because they are not specific or realistic, and it is too late in the process to make changes based on general dislike of the project. In fact, very few comments have ever resulted in a drastic change to a project in Tacoma. At best, comments that are not specific enough to change particular projects may provide insight into future projects.

Currently, Tacoma's planners are attempting to educate residents about understanding and effectively commenting on current projects. This includes attending neighborhood council meetings to explain upcoming projects, explain the SEPA process, explain how to use the city website to follow along with projects, and explain how to write useful comments.

Overall, public meetings may not be the best way to engage Tacoma's residents in the current planning process. Tacoma's current planners have identified specific areas to improve upon the existing participation process. This includes:

- notifying more of the public, not just residents who own neighboring property, about upcoming projects,
- meeting with existing groups, such as neighborhood councils or church groups, to talk about projects that may affect them,
- translating materials into commonly spoken languages, especially for projects that affect groups of residents who primarily speak languages other than English,
- improving the City's online engagement, including creating a system to allow residents to easily find information about and comment on projects directly on the City's website

However, it is difficult for Tacoma's planners to work on these techniques because they are much more time- and resource-intensive than existing techniques.

Bellingham, WA

In a phone interview, a long range planner from the City of Bellingham discussed the role of public meetings and other participation techniques in the city's planning process.

In terms of public meetings, Bellingham's planners find that traditional meetings are not always useful engagement strategies. Generally, the people who attend traditional meetings are not representative of the city's residents as a whole; they tend to be people who are already engaged in the planning process. Most of Bellingham's residents do not attend public meetings because of the many barriers that make it difficult to attend: limited time, resources and interest in the issue, mobility issues, childcare issues, inflexible schedules, especially for people with multiple jobs, and so on. The structure of traditional meetings themselves can also make it difficult to attend. Some residents may be uncomfortable speaking in front of a room full of strangers, and some find other methods of communication, such as social media, more comfortable.

Bellingham planners use different participation techniques for each project depending on the resources available to the project manager. There is no standardization of the process beyond the legal requirements for public notice. However, depending on the complexity of the project, Bellingham planners use non-traditional techniques to gain input from their residents, such as hosting neighborhood meetings, focus groups, open houses, and on-site workshops. These techniques allow residents to learn about the proposed project and provide feedback to planners. Sometimes, Bellingham planners create a community engagement plan before starting a project. This plan defines the audience, identifies community engagement goals, and plans the most useful engagement techniques for each audience group. The purpose of this plan is to be proactive by anticipating residents' concerns upfront rather than reacting to concerns as they come up during the process. This ensures that affected groups are involved in the planning process from the beginning. Sometimes, other local groups, such as tourism groups and planning advocacy organizations, are involved in developing and carrying out the community engagement plan. Though Bellingham does not require that its planners create community engagement plans for every project, planners find that projects that have these plans are the most successful. Beyond improving the project itself, this highly interactive planning process creates good connections and relationships between planners and residents. Residents feel more ownership and excitement for projects that they have been involved in since the beginning, and they have more trust in planners.

Newcastle, WA

In an interview, two of Newcastle's community development staff discussed the role of public meetings and other community involvement techniques in the City's long range planning process.

Newcastle staff often use public meetings, including regularly scheduled planning commission, community activities commission, and city council meetings at city hall, as well as special town hall or informal community conversations meetings. Staff find that these types of meetings are useful for projects that have organized groups as proponents or opponents that can speak on behalf of the public. They are also most effective for neighborhood groups or associations, such as realtors associations or business associations, who have specific requests. Other times, some of the comments that the city receives are complaints about unrelated topics and conspiracy theories rather than useful feedback.

Attendance at regular meetings varies depending on the topic. Generally, attendance is higher when a lot of residents have concerns about the project being discussed. Sometimes there are so many attendees that there is standing room only. Other times, there are only one or two people in the audience. Similarly, more controversial projects tend to receive more written comments. Newcastle's public meetings tend not to be representative of the city as a whole. Town hall meetings, which are held at the local golf club, average 80 to 100 attendees. At these meetings, there are often more people who want to make comments than the City has time for. There is little involvement from the city's Asian or foreign-born residents, even though these groups make up a relatively large proportion of the City's population. The most active participants tend to be retirees, who have the most free time to attend meetings.

For certain large projects, such as the Downtown Strategic Plan or the Lake Boren Master Plan Update, staff used more involved, non-traditional participation methods. For the Downtown Strategic Plan, for example, the city set up a display at a local, central business for a week and invited residents to drop in and learn about the project, ask questions, provide comments, and prioritize project elements. The city also held evening sessions at multiple locations, including the library, YMCA, and city hall, and invited residents to brainstorm in small groups, comment, and respond to a survey (which was also available on the City's website and social media). The city also held three walking tours of 10-20 people at different locations throughout the city, which allowed participants to provide input about their feelings of certain areas. These techniques resulted in more personal participation, better education to residents about the project, and a conversation, rather than a one-way presentation. Of course, the City is not able to use these techniques for all projects because they are much more time- and resource-intensive than traditional techniques.

The City uses social media to advertise community events and meetings, and to post meeting minutes and summaries. Otherwise, the city does not use social media as a participatory technique, especially for day-to-day, current planning.

Part 4: Improving Public Meetings

Parts 2 and 3 of this report discuss some of the barriers that often make public meetings ineffective. Part 4 of this report identifies aspects of public meetings that could be improved and provides recommendations for specific actions that local governments can take to improve their public meetings.

Factors that make meetings successful

Many of the choices that planners already make throughout the participation and planning process influence the breadth of people who participate. Burby (2003) found that the most important of these choices are:
- The number of stakeholders that planners target for participation
- The number of different information types that planners provide to stakeholders
- Whether planners use a citizen advisory committee
- Whether planners consciously choose to make understanding residents' preferences a goal of participation

Walters, Aydelotte and Miller (2000) identify the following factors as important in determining the success of public participation techniques:
- The level of conflict about the issue
- The amount of stakeholders involved
- The degree of certainty about the details of the issue
- The amount of alternatives
- The probability and knowledge about the possible outcomes

Further, Yang and Pandey (2011) find that several other factors influence the effectiveness of public participation. For example, they find that support from elected officials is associated with effective public participation. Without support from elected officials, input from the public is less likely to be taken into account in decisions. They also find that "red tape and hierarchical authority" are associated with poorer outcomes, while using multiple different involvement mechanisms is associated with better outcomes. Yang and Pandey also write that one of the most important variables for participation outcomes is "participant competence;" when participants are more knowledgeable about the issue and the participation process, outcomes tend to be better.

Regarding public meetings and hearings specifically, Baker, Addams, and Davis (2005) find that there are six overarching critical factors that create successful public hearings. These factors require communities to effectively prepare for, publicize, and launch meetings. They also require that communities effectively facilitate meetings, listen to participants, and follow up with the public after the meeting.

Based on the many factors that make participation techniques effective, aspects of the public meeting process that need improvement can be organized into the following categories :
1. Goals of planners and elected officials
2. Number and representativeness participants
3. Knowledge level of participants
4. Participation methods and mechanisms
5. Follow-up by planners and elected officials

Recommendations

Planners can increase the effectiveness of public meetings in their community by considering techniques that address the above categories. The following subsections explain each of these categories and provide relevant recommendations. The recommendations were developed from each of the sources listed in the Further Reading and Resources section.

 Though planners often find that they do not have the resources to use certain participation techniques (see Part 3 of this report), many of the following recommendations do not require significant additional resources. Those that do may be reserved for large or particularly impactful projects.

1. Goals of planners and elected officials
It is important for both the staff members and elected officials of a community to set and stick with appropriate goals before beginning the public involvement process. When planners consciously choose to make the goal of public involvement gathering and understanding residents' preferences, the resulting participation methods are more effective (Burby, 2003). Further, elected officials need to be supportive of and involved in participation techniques (Amsler, 2007).

Planners can ensure that their goals are helpful and appropriate by:
- Adding public involvement to staff members' job descriptions
- Making a public involvement plan at the beginning of each large project
- Reminding themselves (and reminding elected officials) of the purposes of public involvement
- Sharing their commitment to public involvement with residents
- Addressing any pre-existing mistrust between residents and the government
- Clarifying the link between participation methods and future actions and decisions
- Commiting to use the results of the meeting to influence actions and decisions
- Using background information and preliminary conversations with residents to appropriately frame the issue
- Clarifying the purposes of a specific meeting
- Training government officials in running effective meetings and having effective discourse
- Reflecting on the successes and challenges of past participation strategies

2. Number and representativeness of participants
When more stakeholders participate in the decision-making process, resulting outcomes are more likely to be better (Burby, 2003; Walters, Aydelotte and Miller, 2000). Further, when these participants are representative of the community, resulting decisions are better (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2016; Yang and Pandey, 2011; Adams, 2004; McComas et al, 2007). Part 2 of this report discusses the importance of representativeness in more detail. To attract more representative participants, planners must make meetings more accessible and publicize meetings to broader groups of residents.

Planners can make meetings accessible to a larger number of people by:
- Holding meetings in more accessible locations, such as libraries, schools, or major employment centers
- Holding multiple meetings in multiple locations across the community
- Holding meetings at times that are most accessible to underrepresented residents
- Attending and presenting at the meetings of existing community groups
- Posting live streams of each meeting on the government website or social media
- Translating documents and websites into the most commonly spoken languages in the community
- Providing translation services at meetings
- Hiring staff and consultants from typically underrepresented communities
- Providing free childcare at the meeting site
- Providing free transportation to the meeting site
- Providing food at the meeting
- Working with residents and community groups to identify barriers to access public meetings
- Making meetings accessible to people with disabilities. *Increasing Access to Public Meetings and Events for People with Disabilities,* listed in the Further Reading section, contains more information about how to do this.

Planners can more effectively publicize meetings by:
- Making it clear that public feedback will influence future decisions
- Reaching out to networks of existing community groups
- Building ongoing relationships with individual community leaders
- Building ongoing relationships with community groups
- Using multiple media types to publicize the meeting
- Publicizing the meeting using outlets specific to affected community groups, such as in non-English-language newspapers

3. Knowledge level of participants
When meetings participants are more knowledgeable about the specific issue and about governmental decision-making process in general, meeting outcomes are better (Yang and Pandey, 2011). Though planners only have so much control of participants' knowledge levels, there are

techniques planners can use to increase knowledge of both the meeting topic and the participation process in general.

Planners can increase participants' knowledge of the meeting's topic by:
- Clearly announcing the purpose of the meeting to participants
- Explaining how the meeting's topic will affect the public
- Delivering a thorough presentation about the topic at the beginning of the meeting
- Framing the topic from the public's point of view
- Using clear, non-jargon-based language
- Making any information (including reports and legal documents) relating to the project transparent, written in multiple languages, and available online in advance
- Designating a key staff member for each project that residents can contact with questions
- Using the website, social media, newspapers, newsletters, presentations at neighborhood meetings, and radio and television announcements to explain issues
- Holding preliminary, informal meetings to educate participants about the topic and allow them to discuss the topic with one another

Planners can increase participants' knowledge of government systems and the public's role in government systems by:
- Explaining meeting procedures at the beginning of each meeting
- Providing explanations about the public involvement process on the government website
- Presenting at community group meetings with explanations of ways to get involved

4. Participation methods and mechanisms
The methods of participation and specific mechanisms within those methods can significantly influence outcomes (Yang and Pandey, 2011; Baker, Addams, and Davis, 2005). This means that planners must carefully plan both the overall involvement process and the details of individual meetings.

Planners can maximize the effectiveness of public meetings by combining meetings with other compatible methods, including:
- Developing a communications strategy between government officials, community leaders, and the general public using the government's website, social media, and local newspapers
- Using non face-to-face methods such as mail or electronic surveys and online forums
- Calling residents to ask for input
- Allowing residents to provide feedback during existing community events, such as outdoor concerts or farmers markets

Planners can set meetings up in a way that promotes effective dialogue by:
- Clarifying and summarizing important points throughout the meeting
- Having elected officials sit at the same level as meeting attendees
- Assuring participants that their input is valuable
- Ensuring that elected officials listen carefully and speak honestly and respectfully

- Holding several smaller meetings rather than one large meeting
- Asking meeting participants to discuss issues in small groups
- Making meetings more fun by using interactive technology or creating games
- Providing name tags, paper, and pencils to meeting attendees
- Using visual aids
- Allowing residents (including those who cannot physically attend the meeting) to send questions or comments through text, email, or an app
- Choosing meeting facilitators who are skilled at both time management and emotional management. *Dealing with Emotional Audiences,* listed in the Further Reading section below, contains more information.

5. Follow-up by planners and elected officials
Meetings and hearings are most effective when planners follow up by using the feedback they gained and reporting back to residents (Baker, Addams, and Davis, 2005). Otherwise, residents may reasonably feel that their feedback is useless and that government officials do not care about their input (McComas et al, 2007). This means that it is critical that planners honestly and appropriate follow up with the public after each meeting.

Planners can effectively follow up by:
- Holding meetings earlier in the decision-making process so that public input is most useful
- Publishing the record of public comments online
- Posting meeting minutes online as soon as possible after the meeting
- Creating and circulating simple and straightforward summaries of the meeting that include the context of the items discussed
- Using the government website and social media to announce updates throughout the life of the project
- Once the ultimate decision has been made and announced, clearly explaining the reasoning behind it
- Going back to community group meetings later in the process to share outcomes

Further Reading and Resources

The above recommendations come from a variety of research articles, websites, and other publications. These publications, listed below, provide further detail and recommendations:

- [Increasing Access to Public Meetings and Events for People with Disabilities](#) (Increasing Access, n.d.)
- [Dealing with Emotional Audiences](#) (Dealing, 2009)
- [Planning Public Forums: Questions to Guide Local Officials](#) (Amsler, 2007)
- [Critical Factors for Enhancing Municipal Public Hearings](#) (Baker, Addams, and Davis, 2005)
- [IAP2 Public Participation Toolbox](#) (IAP2, 2013)
- [6 Tips for Inclusive Public Meetings](#) (Spivak, 2019)

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