

Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS

A. DETERMINING THE TYPE OF MEETING

The type of meeting, its timing, and its level of formality are determined by its purpose in the overall public involvement effort. An effective strategy tailors meetings to the target audience, the corridor or region, or the types of stakeholder groups—and, in some instances such as public hearings, to the legal requirements.

Scheduling for a meeting depends on what information participants need and when they are likely to need it, as well as on when agencies need information from the public. Sometimes a series of meetings is appropriate:

- A kickoff session;
- Periodic meetings throughout the process, especially timed with major planning milestones and decision points; and
- A meeting or meetings near the end of the process

The underlying principle is to provide timely and adequate opportunities for participation.

Flexibility is crucial. Agencies may vary meeting types to grab attention or focus on specific elements of a plan or program. Near the completion of a process, if an agency is legally required to hold a public hearing, it may choose to prepare potential participants with further informational gatherings and discussions. In cases where time is insufficient, agencies might schedule another date when discussion can continue.

Agencies tailor the type of meeting to its substance and purpose, as outlined below:

- **Public meetings/hearings;**
- **Open houses/open forum hearings; and**
- **Conferences, workshops, and retreats.**

PUBLIC MEETINGS/HEARINGS

How do meetings and hearings differ?

Public meetings present information to the public and obtain informal input from community residents. Held throughout the planning process, they are tailored to specific issues or community groups and are either informal or formal. Public meetings have been used for many years to disseminate information, provide a setting for public discussion, and get feedback from the community. Over 100 public meetings were used to develop a subway extension in Boston. While the technique itself is not innovative, some creative applications are being made. For example, Delaware used public “exhibits” in an informal open house format with one-on-one discussions as a focal point of each phase of a highway planning effort.

A public hearing is a more formal event than a public meeting. Held prior to a decision point, a public hearing gathers community comments and positions from all interested parties for public record and input into decisions. Public hearings are required by the Federal government for many transportation projects and are held in transportation planning at the discretion of the sponsoring organization. Public notices in a general circulation newspaper cite the time, date, and place of a hearing. The period between notice and hearing dates provides time for preparing comments for submission to an agency. During this period, the agency accepts questions and provides clarification. The Georgia Department of Transportation (DOT) expands the question-and-answer period by holding an open house in conjunction with a public hearing. (See [Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).)

Meetings and hearings have these basic features:

- Anyone may attend, as either an individual or a representative of specific interests;
- Meetings may be held at appropriate intervals; hearings are held near the end of a process or sub-process before a decision;
- Hearings require an official hearing officer; meetings do not;
- Hearings usually have a time period during which written comments may be received; and
- Community comments are recorded in written form as input to an agency.

Why are they useful?

Meetings and hearings are forums for receiving community comments. Both are widely used to achieve a basic level of community input and to exchange information with a wide representation of community residents.

Public meetings are optional events and thus tailored to agency and community needs. Public hearings, by contrast, are frequently used to fulfill regulatory requirements. Meetings and hearings can, however, be linked. For example, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) in both Atlanta, Georgia, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, held multiple meetings on a transportation improvement program (TIP) at local public review meetings, followed by a public hearing at the MPO level.

Public meetings are flexible and can be held as part of MPO or statewide planning or part of a single project. There can be multiple sessions on a single topic: the Kentucky DOT held community meetings on the State TIP over a three-month period. Meetings can be held in multiple locations, as can hearings.

A public hearing is a single opportunity for people to be heard. If held at the end of a process without other opportunities for involvement, it does not provide opportunity for early and continuing involvement as described in Federal regulations. More frequent community input is essential to agencies and more satisfying to people as a means of meeting participation requirements and goals. In Seattle, for example, the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) took part in more than 1,000 community meetings, forums, open houses, and hearings to provide information and receive public input on

the Regional Transit Plan. As part of this effort, agency representatives participated as guest speakers in meetings of groups such as the MPO.

Do they have special uses?

Each meeting or hearing facilitates participation. Scheduling these opportunities demonstrates progress toward involving community residents in projects and programs. They provide a place to identify positions and report a consensus or divergence of opinion to an agency. In Brisbane, California, a “Have Your Say Day” was held to obtain individuals’ ideas for the city’s planning efforts.

A single meeting can address several related projects or community planning issues. This is more efficient for agencies, in terms of both staff time and mailing costs, and it helps avoid participant burnout, particularly when many of the same people are interested in several projects or plans. Joint meetings also help to place individual project issues and goals within a broader community context. For 10 projects along the San Francisco waterfront, the city created a Waterfront Transportation Projects Office that coordinated all the city agencies involved. The office used a common mailing list, coordinated newsletters, and joint meetings. Through this cooperative effort, participants saw their specific concerns in relation to the “big picture.”

Who participates? And how?

All community people can participate in meetings or hearings. In some instances, participation is structured, either within larger meetings or for geographic areas. Both the Baltimore and Washington, D.C., MPOs provide time for formal public comment periods (15–20 minutes) at each of their meetings. In Portland, Maine, the MPO received input from neighborhood associations. The New Orleans MPO made special efforts to reach out to businesses by sponsoring two major conferences dealing with transportation issues of interest to businesses. The Mobile, Alabama, MPO brought in Chamber of Commerce representatives to review TIP projects and worked with them and others to forge a consensus. Meetings, but not hearings, can be focused on particular groups.

How do agencies use the output?

Meetings and hearings help monitor community reactions to agency policy, proposals, and progress. By observing reactions at periodic meetings or at a hearing, agencies and people are made aware of opinions and stances. If public meetings are held early in the process, these opinions may be analyzed and responded to before they become solidified or difficult to modify. Public hearings provide formal input to decisions.

Meetings can become a driving force for technical work. The MPO of Dane County (Madison), Wisconsin, devoted one year of a three-year, long-range planning process to responding to community input and comments brought up at a series of meetings scheduled throughout the period.

Who leads public meetings or hearings?

Meetings may be led by an agency staffer or a member of the public. In some instances, it may be appropriate to hire a professional facilitator to lead a meeting, especially if the issue to be discussed is highly divisive or controversial. A “discussion document” helps prepare people for participation if distributed prior to public meetings, as is done in Los Angeles.

By contrast, hearings are led by a public hearing officer, who is an agency representative. Agency staff helps disseminate information, particularly when a public hearing is combined with an open house. Virginia DOT publishes a step-by-step guide for open house public hearings, emphasizing that people

can attend at a time of their own choosing and can present comments either formally or informally, as desired. The Georgia DOT reports that proportionally more citizens make comments at open forum public hearings.

What are the costs?

Resource and staff needs can be substantial, depending on the type of meeting. Delaware's exhibit meetings were heavily staffed—16 to 18 professionals were stationed throughout the room to answer questions and determine the concerns of the 300 to 500 people who attended each event. In a meeting or hearing preceded by an open house, displays of major elements of a plan or process are required for full explanations to community residents. Sketch overlays, notepads, or comment sheets are needed to record public comments at the meeting.

How are they organized?

An agency organizes a public meeting or hearing and prepares pre-meeting materials, including meeting announcements and agendas, displays, audio-visual materials, and any mailings or publicity that are necessary. The public should be made aware of the free access to these materials. (See [Public Information Materials; Mailing Lists](#).) In San Diego, the MPO publishes an agenda and monthly digest of its meetings for public distribution. Agencies consider the needs of people with disabilities and transit access in selecting a convenient place and time.

An agency or community people may want to set up ground rules for meetings. These include:

- Recognizing the legitimacy of others' concerns;
- Accepting responsibility for coming to a meeting prepared for discussion;
- Listening carefully and sharing discussion time with others;
- Encouraging everyone to participate;
- Discussing with intent to identify areas of agreement, clarify differences, and search for common understanding; and
- Establishing a speaker's time limit.

For a public meeting, an agency provides meeting summaries in written form, describing areas of agreement and disagreement. All points of view must be clearly and fairly stated. A hearing transcript is formally prepared, based on a stenographic record or tape.

How are they used with other techniques?

A media strategy is always necessary for either a public meeting or a public hearing to attract the widest possible audience. (See [Media Strategies](#).) For example, adequate advertising for public events always includes more than a single newspaper advertisement. During a public meeting, a brainstorming, visioning, or charrette technique may be used. (See [Brainstorming; Visioning; Charrettes](#).) A facilitator may be appropriate. (See [Facilitation](#).) Special provisions need to be made to comply with the needs of disabled people for access to the meeting. (See [People with Disabilities](#).) Video or audio tapes of proceedings are important for analytic or other purposes. (See [Video Techniques](#).)

An open house is similar to a transportation fair, for either a public meeting or a public hearing. Presentations, slide shows, and one-on-one discussions continue throughout the event. Exhibits are laid out as a series of stations: a reception area; a presentation area for slide shows or short talks; areas for one-on-one discussions between community people and agency staff members, and displays of background information, activities to date, work flow, anticipated next steps, and an array of primary subject panels. (See [Transportation Fairs; Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).)

What are the drawbacks?

A public hearing is an insufficient level of public involvement when held at the end of a process and not accompanied by other opportunities to participate. In such a case, community members feel their concerns cannot be addressed because they are heard too late and have little chance of being integrated into the final decision. At open house public hearings, although people may present views publicly, they are heard primarily by the agency and not by other participants. Such hearings in Delaware include time for speakers to talk in front of others who may have conflicting viewpoints.

Public meetings do not always allay community doubts about agency credibility. Although they improve the possibility of adequate public involvement, meetings must be frequent enough and well-focused enough on issues to demonstrate agency concern about public involvement. In addition, an agency needs to make clear the link between meeting input and decision-making. Public meetings must be held early in the process and reasonably frequently thereafter to dispel fears that they are perfunctory or that an agency is not listening to community concerns. Large meetings or formal hearings may intimidate people and restrain commenting.

A very small percentage of the public attends public meetings, so such meetings should be only one component of a more comprehensive public involvement program.

For further information:

- Atlanta Regional Commission, (404) 364-2500
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- City of San Francisco Chief Administrative Office, (415) 554-5782
- Dane County, (Madison), Wisconsin, (608) 266-4137
- Delaware Department of Transportation, (302) 739-4348
- Georgia Department of Transportation, (404) 986-1360
- New Orleans Metropolitan Planning Organization, (504) 568-6611

OPEN FORUM HEARINGS/OPEN HOUSES

What are open houses and open forum hearings?

An open house is an informal setting in which people get information about a plan or project. It has no set, formal agenda. Unlike a meeting, no formal discussions and presentations take place, and there are no audience seats. Instead, people get information informally from exhibits and staff and are encouraged to give opinions, comments, and preferences to staff either orally or in writing.

An open forum hearing expands a public hearing to include elements of an open house. In addition, after reviewing exhibits and talking with staff, participants can comment on a proposal for the formal transcript of the public hearing. Open forum hearings require formal notice, even though the hearing itself is informal.

Open houses and open forum hearings have the following common characteristics:

- Information is presented buffet-style, and participants shop for information, including graphics, maps, photos, models, videos, or related documents. Space is allocated for tables or booths, and information is mounted on walls. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)
- Agencies reserve table space for comment sheets where people write their opinions. Participants turn in comment sheets at the time or mail them in later. Pre-paying postage for comment sheets increases the likelihood they will be returned. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)
- Agency or technical staff people are present to answer questions or provide details. Often at least one person staffs each table, but agency representatives also are positioned at displays or roam throughout the room.
- These events can be used for either a planning process or project development.
- Since there is no fixed agenda, these events are usually scheduled for substantial portions of a day or evening, so that people can drop in at their convenience and fully participate. Hours should be clearly set and well-publicized. In areas where people work in shifts, open houses/hearings can be scheduled to overlap the shift changes.
- Brochures or videos introduce the open house/open forum process. (See [Video Techniques](#).)
- Agencies usually provide take-home written materials, brochures, or maps. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)
- These events can include non-agency displays. Sister agencies and community proponents or opponents may be given space to present a point of view, displays, documents, or handouts in separate, visible areas. Some agencies have found that allowing public groups to set up tables outside the meeting or hearing room helps the public distinguish official agency information from other sources.

In addition to having all the features of an open house, an open forum hearing has the following distinctive characteristics:

- A formal public notice of a fixed time and date must be published.
- People have a chance to clarify individual comments by reviewing materials before putting their opinions “on the record.”

- Comments are formally recorded. People can comment orally before a designated staff person or court reporter, or they can write opinions on comment forms at the time of or after the event and return them prior to the announced deadline. (See Public Opinion Surveys.)
- The transcript of comments is made available to interested people after the event.

Why are they useful?

Open houses and open forum hearings provide an informal, casual, and friendly ambience.

People drop by at their convenience, get the information that interests them, and stay as long as they wish. Informality encourages participants who are intimidated by formal meetings to attend and give input; often the quality of responses is higher. The short time required for participation attracts people who do not want to sit through long public meetings.

Participants have many opportunities for questions and for detailed answers. One-to-one conversations between agency staff and participants encourage information exchange and foster courtesy and attentiveness. Question periods have no strict time limits.

Participants have direct interaction with staff who might not otherwise be readily available. Making technical staff available shows an agency is open to community input. It allows for an informal exchange of information, with everyone learning from each other. People can receive immediate responses to questions about issues. Technical staff is available to reduce misinformation and rumor. The New Mexico Department of Transportation (DOT) includes a local district engineer in its open houses on planning topics to address immediate project concerns. The Arizona DOT used a series of open houses at various locations throughout the State to develop the statewide transportation plan.

The format focuses on issues rather than positions. This focus allows participants to consider strategies to help an agency identify issues and propose solutions. Participants may request information and comment on a proposal.

Open houses can be tailored to participants' specific needs. They are held as necessary to improve public understanding of a process or project. Graphics or other materials are prepared to directly address issues of public concern. The California and Nevada DOTs held a joint open house on the I-80 Rail Corridor Study, which included maps and displays with a video on potential new rail equipment for operation in the corridor.

Do they have special uses?

Open houses help get a community interested in programs, plans, or projects. The publicity and the procedure call attention to a process that is underway. For a Cleveland, Ohio, light rail transit project, open houses were scheduled to gain name recognition for the project and to call attention to the potential of the line.

Open houses are used when a project is complex. A project can be broken into smaller pieces to enhance understanding. Detailed information is presented graphically or in text. The format allows plenty of time for people to see displays and documents close-up. Agency staffers give oral information to supplement displays.

Open houses are held at an early stage in planning or project development to gather information from people. Further along in the process, they update this information or seek comments on the progress of a draft plan or a project. The Pennsylvania DOT used a combination of open houses with workshops to develop issues, goals, and specific policies for its long-range transportation plan.

Open forum hearings are used primarily with projects, although a State or a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) may choose to call a public hearing for other purposes. During the environmental process for a project, the Nevada DOT uses the open forum format for an “informational hearing” at the beginning of the process and for a design public hearing at the end of the process. The Nebraska DOT holds formal public hearings at the location stage of a project and open forum hearings at the design stage. The Georgia DOT uses open forum hearings for virtually all of its projects. If attendance is large, the Department gives out numbers for those wanting to speak during the event and make their comments before court reporters.

Who participates? And how?

Anyone interested in a plan or project development can attend. New Jersey Transit used open houses as an integral part of its major investment study of a potential Monmouth–Ocean–Middlesex Commuter Rail Line.

Individuals with a specific stake in an issue are urged to attend. They are especially encouraged to attend open forum public hearings and make their opinions known.

Open houses or open forum hearings accommodate people who are reluctant to speak in front of an audience. Casual settings are not as intimidating as a public meeting with a large audience. Participants are encouraged to ask questions. The Orange County, California, transit agency provided bilingual staff at an open house in connection with a major investment study. Staffers were identified by blue dots on their name tags.

The media should be encouraged to attend. Information provided is generally comprehensive and may include useful visuals. Staff people involved in the project are available for details. People give their opinions of agency proposals or projects.

Stakeholders prepare visual and written materials to make their viewpoints known. Space can be made available for community viewpoints expressed in documents or graphics. At the invitation of the Tennessee DOT, American Indians and environmental groups teamed up to display their own materials at a table during an open forum hearing. People representing these groups were present to discuss their position.

People interact directly with staff. To get a “true” sense of a meeting, public hearing officers circulate around the room, listening to questions and answers. Circulating also gives staff members a chance to “relieve” others who are being monopolized by one person. The Tennessee DOT uses a court reporter and comment cards at hearings, along with a two-week period for further comments by letter, petition, or note.

How do agencies use the output?

Agencies use community comments for guidance in planning or project development. Comments help an agency take the pulse of the community, shape and modify plans, and monitor reactions of the individual stakeholders most affected by the proposal or project. Participants in the Orange County, California, transit agency’s open house provided advice on how to best structure the subsequent public involvement program.

Agencies review comments and incorporate them into the work wherever possible. They also provide responses for the record to document and acknowledge receipt of public input. For open forum public hearings, comments and responses form the bulk of the formal transcript of a session, which also includes the agency brochure, summaries of agency displays, a transcription of oral comments, and copies of all written comments.

Who leads the process?

Agency staff members always take the lead for hearings and usually for open houses as well. They are responsible for organizing the session, setting up materials, getting staff to the session, recording the testimony, and documenting the process and community attendance. Staff members also respond to comments made at the session.

Agency representatives with expertise in the issues staff the tables at open house sessions. Technical experts or consultants may assist in the process. At open forum hearings, a public hearing officer is appointed by the agency to assure a session's smooth operation and the agency's response to comments.

What are the costs?

Open houses and open forum hearings involve significant staff time in preparation and reproduction of materials, such as displays, graphics, brochures, and other materials. (See [Public Information Materials; Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks](#).) Significant staff work on publicity efforts is required to make a session successful. (See [Media Strategies](#).) Staff can be briefed to assure that similar questions receive the same answer.

Open houses and open forum hearings are minimally expensive or more elaborate. Expenses increase with the complexity of the project and the scale of graphics or display materials required. Special large graphics dramatize the elements of a project. Expenses also increase as an agency makes extra effort to publicize the event.

Staff needs to be present at sessions held outside normal working hours. If consultants are involved, their contribution is helpful during complex projects or processes.

A hall is needed for the event, and rent may be required. A neutral space is desirable, depending on the level of controversy associated with the session.

How are they organized?

As an early step, an agency defines the issues to be presented. This process guides the choices and preparation of audio-visual materials (whatever graphics tell the story best). The process also guides the selection of written materials to be distributed.

Based on the issues, an agency designates an event coordinator. For example, the coordinator may be from the planning disciplines if the subject is long-range planning, or from the engineering disciplines if a project is to be announced or explored.

The agency coordinator sets a date and time for the event. Both date and time should be convenient for people who are employed during the day. The Regional Transit District in Sacramento, California, held evening and Saturday open houses to review alternatives for an extension of existing light rail into South Sacramento. In experimenting with alternative times for open forum hearings, the Georgia DOT determined that 4:00 to 7:00 P.M. met most community needs. The Michigan DOT has found that 3:30 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. and 7:00 P.M. to 8:30 P.M. work best, in part because rural communities often "respect" the dinner hour. Longer hours are essential for controversial or large-scale projects when many people want to participate. Alternatively, multiple sessions may be held at various times.

The coordinator finds space large enough to accommodate not only tables and displays but also traffic flow for people to move efficiently and comfortably between areas. At hearings, space should include a location for taking oral testimony, and the facility should be relatively quiet, comfortable, easy to find, free

of conflicting events, and handicapped accessible. Places to sit and rest should be provided. Drinking water is essential.

Multiple locations are desirable for large geographical areas and for planning processes. To encourage people to attend meetings for its Statewide Transportation Improvement Program, the Oregon DOT held open house meetings in school cafeterias, libraries, senior centers, and a community theater. (See [Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events](#).)

An agency gets the word out about the event. A media strategy helps an agency determine content and spacing of announcements. Media announcements dramatically enhance public awareness. Handouts are distributed in areas of potentially high interest. (See [Media Strategies](#).)

The agency prepares illustrative materials for display. Presentation boards, copies of documents, maps, and videos are very helpful. (See [Public Information Materials; Video Techniques](#).) Topics to be illustrated can include traffic, noise, specific sites, economics, design, neighborhood impacts, routes, goals, evaluation criteria, and policy issues. Fact sheets or maps can be provided for visitors to take home. The South Carolina DOT uses color coding on graphics intended for community review to emphasize and highlight the projected impacts of a project.

Tables are provided for specific purposes that allow people to address issues in depth. Each table should be clearly identified. During the feasibility study for the Los Angeles–Bakersfield High Speed Ground Transportation Project, tables were provided for the following: sign-in; orientation and video; routes and stations; environmental study; engineering; train technology; costs; statewide policy; and terminal station location.

The agency staffs the event. Staff people with specific areas of expertise are scheduled for each table. Reception staff people are essential to welcome new arrivals and to let them know how the open house works. The Georgia DOT uses a “greeter”—a staffer who welcomes participants and helps them understand the process. Other staff members can aid in recording comments or in explaining issues to people. South Carolina DOT personnel wear name tags to identify themselves and encourage questions from participants.

A method for recording comments from the community is established. At open house sessions, an agency can provide cards for people to fill out, for either immediate or mail-back return. For mail-backs, pre-paid postage on the card or envelope speeds response.

For open forum hearings, an agency must provide a formal means of recording comments. The Georgia DOT uses a court reporter to record comments, while the South Carolina DOT provides a staff person to tape record them.

Long lines at stenographer or tape recording stations detract from the informality and convenience of this format for the public. Agencies may provide multiple stenographers or recording stations. The Georgia DOT used two stenographers for an open forum hearing attended by about 1,500 people. Another strategy is to use speaker time limits. At an open house on its statewide plan, the New York State DOT used a traffic signal as a device to let speakers know when their speaking time had expired. The Delaware DOT schedules its speakers in order of sign-up and adheres to a specified time limit. In other locations, however, time limits would be unacceptable. Agency staff in Michigan successfully rely on the rest of the audience to encourage brevity. Knowing when time limits are essential or appropriate requires a thorough knowledge of the community involved.

How are they used with other techniques?

Open houses can be combined with public meetings. Displays, brochures, documents, videos, and other materials can introduce a meeting and help people prepare for it. (See [Public Meetings/Hearings](#).)

Open houses can be partly staffed with civic advisory committee members. For the New Haven, Connecticut, Q Bridge Study, committee members staffed open houses to help ConnDOT respond to questions about the study and the alternatives being considered. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).)

Open houses often incorporate brainstorming or focus groups. The Delaware DOT allowed participants to write comments directly on maps. Other people could then review the comments and add their opinions. North Carolina's Triangle Transit Authority conducted mini-focus groups as part of open houses on long-range transit options for the region. (See [Brainstorming; Focus Groups](#).)

Public information is essential, including press releases, briefings, speakers' bureaus, brochures, posters, mailings, and media announcements. All information must be timely to assure that public hearing notice requirements are met and to give people time to fit the event into their schedules. Reminders can be sent out a few days before the session. (See [Public Information Materials; Media Strategies](#).)

Mailing lists are used to contact potentially interested people. An agency should make special efforts to solicit minority and ethnic participation and attendance at the session. (See [Mailing Lists](#).)

An open house is a convenient place to conduct an informal survey. People can complete the survey right away or mail it back. In this fashion, an agency obtains responses quickly and analyzes the results to ascertain community interest and understanding. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) The Nevada DOT conducted a survey of interested parties in conjunction with an open forum hearing. As part of work on its long-range plan, New Jersey DOT recruited random participants for focus groups during open houses conducted at a shopping mall.

What are the drawbacks?

An open forum hearing without an audience session precludes debate on a proposal's merits. Parties do not hear opposing views first-hand—nor do they have an opportunity to clarify stances or raise questions about opposing viewpoints. Some critics charge that agencies use open forum hearings as a “divide-and-conquer” strategy. If differing views are not heard, the public may be surprised to find a controversy exists. When people hear one another, they develop an improved understanding of a proposal and its implications for other people. To assure that multiple viewpoints are presented at an open forum hearing, the Ohio DOT allows community groups to set up exhibition tables near the open meeting tables, labeled clearly to distinguish them from agency tables.

An open house/open forum hearing only reaches people willing to attend. Potential stakeholders who do not attend may not receive essential information, and their opinions are not heard. Translators, translations of summaries, and blue dots on name tags of bilingual staff, were used to supplement the Orange County, California, open house, because minority participants said they were ill at ease at such events. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).)

Outreach is limited to a few days, even if hearings are held in different locations. A single event should not be the sole opportunity for people to be heard. It does not reach large numbers on a continuing basis—a key factor in successful public involvement.

Informal conversation does not replace written comment. In brief conversations with agency officials during an open house, people sometimes get lulled into a sense of being heard and fully understood. Agency staff cannot be expected to retain all opinions and may not have sufficient time to note each statement. Unless official recording is underway, people should be encouraged to present written comments, so their opinions or viewpoints are sure to be heard.

Constituents do not hear elected officials at an open forum hearing. At traditional public hearings, elected leaders announce their views. At open forum hearings, however, officials can speak to only a few people at a time.

Effective displays and materials may be expensive. Large-scale graphics and photographs are essential to promote rapid comprehension and understanding of a proposal. Video is often used as a method of explaining both the proposal and the process of public review. (See [Video Techniques](#).)

When are they most effective?

An open house effectively disseminates information, either at an early stage or prior to decision-making. Input to decisions or plans is also collected. Additional events update information and obtain further public input. The Montana DOT uses an open house or walk-in session to disseminate information, frequently in tandem with a traditional hearing.

An open forum hearing is useful at the location or design stage for gathering information. The Montana DOT uses it when it is essential to register opinions from many subgroups.

For further information:

- Connecticut Department of Transportation, (860) 594-2000
- Georgia Department of Transportation, (404) 699-4406
- Montana Department of Transportation, (406) 444-7205
- Nebraska Department of Transportation, (402) 479-4871
- Nevada Department of Transportation, (702) 687-3463
- New Mexico Department of Transportation, (505) 827-3228
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, (717) 772-2563
- South Carolina Department of Transportation, (803) 737-1350
- Tennessee Department of Transportation, (615) 741-2221

CONFERENCES, WORKSHOPS, AND RETREATS

What are conferences, workshops, and retreats?

Conferences, workshops, and retreats are special meetings to inform people and solicit input on specific policy issues, plans, or projects. In size and importance, they range from a subset of a larger meeting to a large multi-day event.

A conference is a highly-structured program of presentations and discussions. Conferences usually have an overall theme, with multiple related sessions throughout the day. They can have presentations or panel discussions followed by questions. Top officials or panels of recognized experts help boost interest in attendance. Conferences often have plenary sessions attended by all participants, followed by breakout sessions on various elements. Conferences are as short as half a day or as long as three days. The Kansas and Pennsylvania DOTs held all-day conferences on their long-range statewide transportation plans. Workshops dealt with specific issues of the plans.

A workshop is a task-oriented meeting organized around a particular topic or activity. Typically, it involves a relatively small group (20–40) and addresses aspects of a narrowly-defined topic. Workshops are usually one to three hours in duration for small groups to work on specific agenda. Because they are relatively short and task-focused, workshops can be part of a larger meeting, conference, or retreat. The Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission includes workshops at the beginning of every meeting to provide information and discussion on specific topics to be handled later in the meeting.

Retreats are workshops held in non-traditional settings without distractions. A retreat is especially useful to work on personal conflict resolution and communication. Participants give their undivided attention to specific issues without interruptions for phone calls or everyday distractions. Like workshops, retreats are typically task-oriented and work on focused topics. Because of the complexity of an issue or topic, a retreat may require one full day and sometimes longer.

Conferences, workshops, and retreats have several common characteristics. They:

- Are special events, publicized separately from other events;
- Highlight specific aspects of issues;
- Are applied in either planning or project development;
- Set the stage for plans or projects;
- Showcase and refine specific aspects of plans or projects;
- Provide focus and direction to participants; and
- Often require advance registration or are invitational.

Why are they useful?

Conferences, workshops, and retreats are useful at any stage of a process. As special meetings, they are used early to set the stage for formulating plans or projects. They are used mid-process to showcase and refine specific aspects of plans or projects, resolve conflicts, and work toward consensus. Near the end of a process, they demonstrate findings and conclusions of the work effort. The Albany, New York, MPO scheduled conferences at the beginning, mid-point, and end of development of its long-range plan.

Special meetings allow people to better understand a project or plan. They help individuals see the viewpoint of others. They give a “snapshot” of community concerns and reactions to proposals. The Portland, Oregon, Metro conducted mode and alignment workshops that generated good ideas from community residents. Participants worked on maps to illustrate their concerns and place proposed alignment options.

Special meetings offer a way to zero in on specific issues and concerns. They deal with a single topic and its ramifications, or focus on notable impacts of concern to individuals or groups. They provide an opportunity for detailed discussion on a wide variety of elements of a plan or a project. The Massachusetts Highway Department sponsored a series of conferences on the future of Route 128, Boston's beltway. One metropolitan-level conference included presentations by experts from around the country, while the other two focused on State and local concerns.

Do they have special uses?

A conference helps “kick off” a planning process or project development. Agency or elected officials add credibility to a process by being on the program to discuss their hopes for the project.

A conference provides a forum to discuss statutes and regulations. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) held a public conference called “The Right Route: Pollution Prevention and Transportation Planning in New England.” National leaders from EPA and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) first addressed plenary sessions dealing with the implications of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA,) the Energy Policy Act, and the Clean Air Act. Workshops were scheduled for late morning and afternoon to deal with issues and develop a list of potential outcomes to be reviewed by a panel of regional policy leaders at the closing plenary session.

Conferences are used to celebrate the successful completion of a process. Local residents and agency staff come together to review and evaluate a process and its product. Local officials and participants may officially bring closure to a successful process. Celebratory events reinforce the value of an inclusive planning process and give agencies an informal way to thank community members for their time and effort.

Workshops are particularly useful for smaller groups of people who want to participate intensively. A small number of participants gives each a way of being heard and registering thoughts and opinions. Small groups allow a greater appreciation of others' views through opportunities for more extensive interaction. Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, used workshops to ascertain local concerns and demonstrate how the concerns might be met, largely through urban design solutions.

Workshops and retreats are inherently participatory and encourage a “working together” atmosphere. The informality encourages discussion and give-and-take. By focusing on narrow topics, workshops allow time for every participant to express a viewpoint. They are easily integrated into a larger participatory process. The North Dakota Consensus Council, a public-private partnership, sponsors forums on issues ranging from education to local government services. Facilitators elicit diverse views, using consensus-building techniques to resolve conflicts and find common ground. (See [Facilitation](#).)

Workshops and retreats make it easier to participate without “going on the record.” Typically, participants can speak out without being quoted at a later time. Questions are asked to glean information. Participants raise and discuss points without formal attribution, and the “trial balloons” that are a positive feature of negotiation are floated. The Rochester, New York, Telephone Corporation held workshops to solicit concerns and views about potential deregulation of the telecommunications industry in that city.

Retreats are used to develop details of a transportation program. The Georgia DOT held a two-day retreat with 40 representatives of transportation users, operators, customers, and groups to “tell us what the public involvement process should be.” The University of Georgia's Institute of Community and Area Development was retained to organize, conduct, and facilitate the meeting, resulting in short-term recommendations that have been implemented by the Georgia DOT.

Retreats can “clear the air” on contentious issues, bringing disputants together to hear all sides of an issue and work out differences. They can work on thorny problems and look for elements of agreement. With a neutral facilitator, retreats provide an off-the-record means of stating and working on issues between opponents. The process of addressing difficult issues helps loosen adversarial relationships and creates the possibility for compromise and consensus.

Who participates? And how?

Special meetings target specific stakeholders for presentations and discussions. Conferences, workshops, and retreats help deal with specific local concerns. They help garner suggestions and support by explaining a proposal thoroughly. The State of Washington’s Western Area Power Administration used workshops to develop and select strategies of its plan for future power needs using customer preference exercises.

Conferences, workshops, and retreats can be tailored to subsets of groups or constituencies who do not normally participate. The level of impact on specific portions of a community may warrant establishing specific meetings for them. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).) Over time, it may be appropriate to add workshop sessions to incorporate local concerns into planning or project development. Costa Mesa, California, organizations sponsored “living room dialogues” among small groups to air feelings and issues about day laborers gathering in a park and shopping center while waiting to be hired. Discussions resulted in establishment of a hiring center for day workers and a new human rights commission.

Conferences are customarily open to the public. Workshop and retreat participants come from the entire community or by invitation. Special efforts are needed to assure that all potential stakeholders are aware of the event. Invitations can be extended to business leaders and active members of civic clubs or organizations, along with agencies and interest groups. Inviting elected officials to special meetings is always appropriate. Certain conferences are attended by invitation only. The Minnesota Metropolitan Council invited key players in business, government, and education to a conference on regional economic strategies as part of a plan to build council identity.

Knowledgeable people should be part of each special meeting. For conferences, experts in specific fields serve as speakers or presenters of information. For workshops and retreats, resource people are essential for providing information and answering questions. Agency people ordinarily act as individuals in the meetings, unless specialized questions are asked. For breakout sessions, workshops, and retreats, a trained facilitator acts in the neutral, central role of leading the meeting and keeping it on course.

Workshops and retreats can target specific groups. The Edison Electric Institute held a two-day retreat to improve communication between industry and consumer groups. A group of 20 to 24 people were invited, chosen by their demonstrated ability to effectively present a position for their groups. Time was allowed for socialization to encourage personal relationships and dialogue among the participants.

During a special meeting, participants ask questions and add their points of view to the discussion. They challenge agency reasoning on projects or plans. They discuss alternative uses of resources.

Agencies hold meetings in local areas convenient for participants. Planning for the Central Valley water project in California included public workshops at disparate locations held every four or five months over a three-year period. The project involved four rounds of meetings throughout the valley.

Participants need preparatory information prior to a meeting. An agency sends information to potential participants in advance to let them choose whether or not to attend a special meeting. (See [Mailing Lists](#).) A conference agenda or brochure displays topics, speakers, and opportunities for participation in discussion. A telephone number or agency contact helps participants find further information.

How do agencies use conferences, workshops, and retreats?

Special meetings send a message of agency commitment to public involvement and enhance agency credibility in a process of planning or project development. A conference held in Atlanta, Georgia, helped define new interagency approaches to fostering public participation of people affected by transportation investments. The conference was jointly sponsored by the Federal Highway, Transit, and Rail Administrations and the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University.

They give plans and projects a high profile and attract interest. By focusing events and presentations on a single proposal, an agency attracts many participants, including the media, to an event where they can be guided toward presentations or discussions that interest them.

Conferences give in-depth information about a project or plan. The complexity of a planning effort or project development can be portrayed at a conference where detailed information can be obtained. A conference includes sub-meetings and presentations on a variety of topics. A conference program has several topics presented at the same hour in separate rooms, allowing participants to choose among them.

Special meetings provide input to a plan or project. Agencies obtain new ideas in response to their proposals. Participants have an opportunity to offer suggestions for policy changes or for alterations in details of a project. Special meetings provide an opportunity for participants to debate the issues with one another.

Who leads them?

A conference may require specialized organization and leadership. The scope of a conference, involving many presentations and break-out sessions, may be challenging for existing staff to manage. An agency conference manager may be needed. Consultant staff may be required to manage the event.

A conference can be co-sponsored by more than one agency, thus broadening the range of concerns and attracting new participants. The Missouri Highway and Transportation Department has had successes with co-sponsored conferences.

Conferences with few speakers may be managed by a small staff. Organizing date, place, time, and speakers is manageable if the event is uncomplicated.

A workshop is led by an agency staffer or community volunteer, if the size of the group is manageable. A large workshop requires special skills to moderate the event and keep it on target. An agency project manager may attend a workshop but usually should not lead the session if issues are highly controversial, since that may compromise the objectivity of the process. Workshops may be led by citizens themselves. The Puget Sound Regional Transit Project has financially supported citizen-initiated workshops. This alleviates the issue of government control and promotes community leadership.

Retreats require a neutral moderator. Agency staff members may be able to lead the session but are seen as biased if they are involved in the process or project. A neutral moderator should remain unbiased in soliciting ideas and comments from all participants and should direct the proceedings toward the goals of the retreat. (See [Facilitation](#).)

What are the costs?

Initial costs include renting meeting space and breakout rooms, if necessary. Conferences require staff for entrance and registration areas and preparation of individual rooms for specific presentations. They include arranging for speakers or presentations, including costs for hotels and food if out-of-town

speakers are used. Costs frequently include refreshments for participants. For a full-day conference, it is wise to arrange for lunch for the speakers and the participants.

A few conference costs are offset by registration fees. The fee ordinarily covers only the costs of printing and refreshments. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, a community organization, charged \$15 for a conference to inform people about transportation issues, the importance of public involvement, and new opportunities for involvement. The conference included skills workshops dealing with gaining media exposure, influencing decision-makers, and building a coalition. The Albany, New York, MPO charged small fees to cover meals for its conferences but provided scholarships for low-income participants.

Workshops are less costly than conferences. A workshop usually requires only a room and a staff person to manage materials, welcome participants, and document the process. Fees for a workshop or retreat are usually not appropriate, because they can discourage people from attending.

A retreat requires a room and a facilitator. The facilitator must be neutral and not a proponent of an agency's agenda. Like a workshop, a retreat requires only a room and a staff person to serve the needs of both the facilitator and the participants. (See [Facilitation](#).)

Finding rooms in publicly-owned sites helps keep costs down. Colleges or universities provide good locations for conferences, workshops, or retreats. These sites are usually neutral locations where participants feel welcome.

Supplementary funding sources may be available. The Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, MPO received financial support from a local foundation to pay for all costs of a weekend retreat for a blue-ribbon panel reviewing the long-range plan.

How are they organized?

All special meetings are coordinated with the community, which provides input on what issues to cover and who from the community should be involved. Publicity is funneled through neighborhood channels. The community may suggest a place and date for the special meeting. (See [Key Person Interviews](#); [Civic Advisory Committees](#); [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

Conferences require a rigid structure and agenda for speakers, presentations, and break-out groups. Preparation for a conference requires a good deal of staff work to organize the content and publicize the event to the community.

Agency staff organize a conference, if resources are available. Agencies should be aware that the resources are significant. Specialized consultants may be necessary as conference assistants.

Workshops and retreats have a flexible structure. They can be organized more casually than a conference and are flexible in selection of date, place, and format. However, they require leadership to assure that they accomplish the assigned task or goal. Both workshops and retreats need an agenda, noting the time available for discussion of agenda elements, and information on what the agency intends to do with the information from the meeting.

How are they used with other techniques?

Brainstorming is an integral element of conferences, workshops, or retreats and a useful way to quickly involve many participants in the process. (See [Brainstorming](#).)

Visioning is advanced by workshops and retreats. A special meeting can focus on establishing a vision for the future. With an allotted time period to explore varied aspects, the special meeting is well-

adapted to this use. Oregon DOT used workshops on issues and visions at six locations along the Pacific Coast in developing a draft master plan. (See [Visioning](#).)

Facilitation is an important element of special meetings, especially workshops and retreats. Participants need a facilitator's guidance on timing, focus, and reporting the events of a workshop or retreat. (See [Facilitation](#).)

Small group techniques are used in workshops to open a meeting and gain participants' interest. They can then be used to set goals for the meeting and to guide the process. (See [Small Group Techniques](#).)

Special meetings supplement regular meetings. Conferences, workshops, and retreats are high points of an overall program of public participation and cannot by themselves constitute a public participation program.

Are they flexible?

Workshops are used in a variety of ways—as a break-out of a conference or retreat or as special events on their own, to involve people in discussions and resolution of thorny issues. In Washington State, Seattle's Puget Sound Regional Council offered a series of community workshops at several points throughout its planning processes.

Conferences and retreats can include workshops on the agenda. Large special meetings can have break-out sessions for concurrent workshops focusing on specific issues.

Special meetings are held on any appropriate days and at convenient times. The timing of a special meeting is largely up to an agency, guided by community needs or requests.

The level of effort for a special meeting is flexible. A special meeting can be devised to meet community needs within the resources available to an agency. Conferences require the greatest output of resources, while workshops may expend few agency resources.

What are the drawbacks?

Special meetings require substantial publicity. Agencies need to be prepared to expend resources to make the community aware of the meetings.

All special meetings require extensive preparation by staff. Resources can be quickly expended during the preparation period.

Conferences are often expensive and may be viewed as exclusionary. Arrangements for space and speakers can be significant. Publicity must be extensive to attract media and community attention.

A retreat requires a skilled facilitator.

A workshop is ineffective if leadership is unable to keep it on track. It is not automatically a positive event, unless effort is expended to assure that staff or experienced personnel are present to guide its progress.

For further information:

- Chesapeake Bay Foundation, (301) 261-2350
- Environmental Justice Resource Center, Clark Atlanta University, (404) 880-8000
- Kansas Department of Transportation, (913) 296-2252
- Minnesota Metropolitan Council (Minneapolis/St. Paul), (612) 291-6423
- North Dakota Consensus Council, (701) 328-2000
- Rochester Telephone Company, (716) 777-1000
- University of Georgia Institute of Community and Area Development, (706) 542-3350