



Saskatchewan Municipal

Management Resource

Running Effective Public Meetings

Introduction

Public meetings are a great way for a municipality to provide information to its citizens, and to get feedback on a variety of things. However, there are very few things worse than a poorly managed public meeting. Many different things can go wrong with public meetings, but managing them effectively isn't all that difficult. This resource provides a quick summary of things to avoid when conducting a public meeting, and things to do if you want your public meeting to be effective.

Public meetings do not have to involve nervous officials cowering behind tables while angry members of the public hurl abuse. Good design and preparation, ideally in consultation with some of those likely to attend, an experienced and respected chairperson or facilitator (preferably independent), and a suitable venue at a suitable time, can all reduce the risks and make a public meeting a productive event.

Facilitators of effective public meetings know that public meetings have three phases, all of which are equally important. The first phase is the planning phase, where the facilitator makes sure that everything is in place for a successful meeting. The second phase is the meeting itself, which the facilitator manages in order to make it effective. The final phase is the follow-up phase during which the meeting organizers make sure to add to the credibility of the meeting by following-up with the participants.

Things “Not to Do” when Planning and Conducting a Public Meeting

DON'T:

- Wait to the last minute to distribute information about the meeting. Public meetings need to be well attended in order to be seen to be effective.
- Make the agenda too long. Agendas for public meetings need to be highly focused so that people don't feel like their time is being wasted.
- Hold the meeting in an out of the way location. It is important that the location you select is convenient for your attendees, and is suitable for the size of group you expect.
- Schedule the meeting at a time that works just for you. It is important to spend time getting to understand the schedules of those you hope to attend. If the meeting is scheduled at a time that is difficult for them, they will be much less likely to attend.
- Be unprepared. It is important to take the time, ahead of the meeting, to prepare properly for the meeting.
- Let one person or group dominate the discussion. Public meetings can be an intimidating setting for people at the best of time. If one group dominates discussion, everyone else is more likely to stay quiet. A good facilitator will properly manage the discussion.
- Make the meeting too long. Anything longer than 90 minutes should include a break to allow people to stretch and refresh. The best meetings end in 90 minutes or less.

- Forget to follow up with people. If you want people to continue attending and participating in your public meetings, they need to believe that the meetings have purpose. One way you can help with this is to make sure that you follow up with attendees after the meeting to report on progress.

Things to Remember if you want a Successful Public Meeting

- Consider getting an experienced facilitator, it can make a world of difference.
- The planning and follow-up stages are just as important as the meeting itself.
- Location and timing are very important.
- Make time for breaks.
- Make sure people know what to expect throughout the meeting.
- Be open and transparent about why the meeting is being held and what the expected outcomes are.
- Everyone has a right to speak and be heard.
- No opinions are useless.
- Make sure to deal with all agenda items.
- Keep discussion flowing and topical.
- Assign follow-up responsibilities and make it happen.

The Three Phases of a Public Meeting

Planning Phase

In the planning phase, it is important to begin by defining the purpose of the meeting and your desired outcomes from the meeting. In other words, why are you having this meeting and what do you hope to accomplish?

When you know what you're doing and why, it is much easier to determine who needs to be at the meeting. Even though it's a public meeting, there may be specific people who need to be there in order for the meeting to be successful. For instance, if you're having a public meeting about the new fire services cost bylaw; you probably want to make sure that your local fire chief is present. When considering important attendees, it is also important to consider bringing in an external and experienced facilitator to manage the meeting.

Pick the right room for the type of meeting and size of meeting you expect. Make sure that you can get the room set up in a way that will make the meeting easier, and also make sure that you have all of the equipment you need for the meeting (flip charts, pens, tape, projector and screen, etc.) Will you need to have coffee, tea, juice, and snacks at the meeting? Is there adequate parking at the facility? Consider what you will do if media shows up at the meeting. Will they be allowed to film and tape record the meeting, or will they have to wait for breaks to interview people?

If there will be handouts at the meeting, make sure you will have enough copies. Consider whether or not people will have enough information at the meeting to be able to seriously consider whatever it is you might be discussing. Make sure that people have what they need, and that if need be, they have it enough in advance of the meeting to be prepared.

Develop an agenda that covers off the topics you need to discuss, but isn't too long. Make sure that the agenda is thoroughly distributed so that everyone knows what to expect at the meeting. Finally, make sure that you have effectively told people about the meeting so that your attendance is strong.

The Public Meeting

Have handouts, and copies of the agenda, available for people when they enter the meeting. If you've decided to have minutes or notes taken at the meeting, make sure you assign one person to be responsible for taking them.

Once the meeting starts, consider having time for introductions before the formal agenda starts. Avoid long presentations, and try to keep the meeting lively and interactive. Allow opportunity for everyone to participate in the discussion.

If the meeting is going to run longer than about 90 minutes, provide time for a break. In order to avoid having the meeting run long, set a particular time by which you will adjourn, and stick to it.

The Follow-Up Phase

Consider doing a post-meeting evaluation. You could approach several meeting participants and ask them for their feedback about how the meeting went. This will help to improve the way in which you manage future meetings.

After the meeting, have key participants review the meeting notes/minutes and agree that they accurately reflect what happened. Once everyone is comfortable with the minutes, they should be distributed widely, and posted publicly. They could be posted at town hall, on a community bulletin board, or on the municipal website.

In addition to producing the minutes, the meeting organizers should keep track of action items that came out of the meeting and make sure that they are completed in a timely fashion. That way, if there is a follow-up meeting, progress can be reported.

Conclusion

Public meetings are a fantastic tool for communicating to a large group of people. However, they need to be properly handled in order to be successful. Following the tips in this brief resource will help your public meetings to be more efficient and effective.

Good luck with your public meeting process!