



NEIGHBORHOODS FIRST

Neighborhood Outreach Program



HOW TO ORGANIZE A NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

If you are interested in organizing an association to represent your neighborhood's interests, the first important step is to identify your purpose or "vision" for the organization. Next, determine whether others share your vision.

- *Talk with your neighbors; find out what they consider your neighborhood's strengths, weaknesses, short-term and long-term needs.*
- *Ask whether they would participate in a community organization, and if so, what kind of organization would best suit the needs and character of the neighborhood.*
- *Mobilize a nucleus of neighbors to help you with the initial organizational steps.*

If there is sufficient interest in organizing and supporting a community association, your next step should be to involve the broader neighborhood in your efforts. The following is a suggested course of action:

- *Hold an organizational meeting to define your purpose and elect officers.*
- *Draw up a simple set of bylaws -- an organizational plan that describes such things as: who is eligible for membership; how officers are selected; how often the group meets; how dues are assessed, etc.*

ORGANIZATION METHODS

The following key points in effective organization for your neighborhood association was taken from Bernie Jones' NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING: A Guide for Citizens and Planners (1990). The key points include: participation, planning process, outreach methods, participation methods, running effective community meetings, physical arrangements, and roles.

PARTICIPATION

For purposes of neighborhood planning, democratic participation is important for three key reasons:

- The greater the participation of residents in the making of a plan, the more likely it is that the plan will accurately reflect their needs and concerns.
- The greater the participation, the greater is the sense of ownership that people have about the plan, which can translate into a greater determination on their part to see that the plan gets implemented.
- The greater the participation, the harder it is for others, such as public officials, to ignore the plan.

PLANNING PROCESS

- Data collection and analysis
- Issue identification
- Community goal setting
- Concept development
- Alternatives generation and selection
- Final recommendation
- Presentation

OUTREACH METHODS

- *Personal Contact.* Included under personal contact are door-to-door visits and phone calling. In many ways, these are the best outreach methods because they are the most personalized. However, they can be time-consuming. One way to cut short the time required is to organize a phone tree, where one person calls three other people, who each call five other people and so on. The door knocking work usually includes leaving a flyer or leaflet describing the planning project and announcing the next meeting.

- *Media.* The local electronic and print media can help your planning team do its outreach work. Most radio stations and newspapers, and some TV stations, will run your press release or public service announcement (PSA) if you get it to them in proper time and form. Ask them, and they will gladly tell you their guidelines. If your community has a public service cable channel, you are sure to have ample opportunity to plug your project. As a last resort, space can be purchased in the print or electronic media, but that is usually not necessary.
- *Field Office/Drop-in Center.* What is involved here is having a physical place, such as retail store front, where residents can drop in and learn about the neighborhood planning process. Typically, there are maps, photographs, flowcharts of the process, and other visual displays. Ideally, such a place is staffed with someone who can answer questions and give out information. There can also be the opportunity to gather data, using questionnaires that visitors are asked to complete. This site should be in high traffic, high visibility area, such as a popular retail center. Offering the planning team free or cheap use of the space could be a nice way for a neighborhood merchant or property owner to make a contribution to the planning project.
- *Utilize Existing Organizations.* The meetings, offices, or newsletters of existing organizations can be very helpful channels of communication for letting residents know of the planning process. At meetings, personal presentations can be made, especially by participants, who like those attending, are from the neighborhood. For newsletters, a short article can be prepared, or if the organization will allow, a flyer (especially on bright-colored paper) inserted into the newsletter. Flyers and posters can be displayed at the offices of these organizations. Certainly other neighborhood institutions—churches, supermarkets, community centers, post offices, and so on—can be similarly used for getting the word out.
- *Displays at Key Settings.* Somewhat more elaborate than a flyer or poster tacked up somewhere would be a display about the planning process that might include such things as written information, photos, or maps. This could be in a very prominent place where many paths cross and could be changed periodically as the project moves along. If there is some site in the neighborhood that is central to the original need for a plan, such as a vacant lot, right in front of that might be the ideal place to plant the display (assuming it is a busy enough site).

PARTICIPATION METHODS

- *Large Community Meetings.* This is the method used most often in neighborhood planning to get participation from residents: you prepare an agenda, you reserve the school gym or the church basement, you distribute leaflets in the neighborhood, you prepare pots of coffee and donuts, and you wait, hope, and pray people show up! Done well, the general community meeting is very valuable; done poorly, it turns people off and they do not come back. Doing it well entails all those steps: preparing a nicely paced, engaging meeting, making sure you have used every conceivable channel of communication to get the word out, obtaining the use of and arranging a proper place, and having a few refreshments available.

- *Small Living Room Meetings.* Known by some as the coffee klatsch, this type of meeting occurs at someone's home, with invitations usually being issued just to residents of the immediate block or other small area. It can be a very useful method in the early stages of a planning process. Its more intimate setting is usually less threatening and offers attendees more opportunity to interact informally. The planner might utilize this approach early on to broaden the base of participation, before getting into substantial work. (Once a planning process is under way, committees may meet in this fashion.)
- *Open House.* The open house is a participation technique that might be combined with the field office/drop-in center. It is the creation of a special occasion when neighbors are invited to drop in and view such things as plans, data, and maps. This can be done even if there is not a regular field office: the open house can be held at a church, community center, business, or whatever space is available. It should be well advertised, limited to about four hours, and be held at a time thought appropriate for the neighborhood, such as an evening, or weekend afternoon.

Refreshments and printed information should be available, as well as knowledgeable participants who can talk informally with visitors about the planning process going on. There should be some way attendees can register their views, such as on brief questionnaires, large newsprint tablets, or 3"x 5" index cards.

- *Workshops.* This term covers a large variety of participation techniques. What is meant by the workshop essentially is an interactive meeting, where special techniques are used to stimulate participation and the flow of creative ideas. It may be done as a *charette*, which is a marathon-type session (e.g., all day Saturday, a full weekend, or three successive evenings). In the charette, there is usually the aim of completing some product, such as the draft plan, by the end of the session. Some expertise may be required to pull this off at least if some specialized techniques, such as those which follow, are going to be used. Generally, a neighborhood planner staging a charette will recruit other staff members to help out. Having the head of the planning office there, as well as some elected officials, lends an air of credibility to the event.
1. Brainstorming. This is simply the process of asking people for their ideas and then encouraging a rapid-fire flow of ideas, without discussion, questioning, or challenging. All ideas are initially taken as legitimate and written down on large newsprint pads for later use.
 2. Presenter, Panel, or Debate. Having some people at the front of the audience who present some organized comments can be an effective way to generate ideas and subsequent participant discussion. This may be one speaker or a panel of residents or outside experts. They may each present their views or a moderator may oversee a debate.

3. Trial. A variation of the above techniques would be to stage a mock trial, complete with an accused, a prosecutor, a defense attorney, and a jury. In the context of neighborhood planning, the charge might be that "the neighborhood is ugly." Someone then makes the charge, someone else defends, and the jury (maybe a few people or the whole audience) argues to a verdict. The trial illustrates the idea that imagination should be given free reign in the task of bringing people together to deliberate about their neighborhood.
4. Buzz Groups. This is a fancy name for breaking a large group into small groups to discuss, brainstorm, devise alternate solutions, and so on. The importance of the small group is that it allows greater participation by all members. Buzz groups usually designate someone to report their conclusions back to the full group once reassembled.
5. Role Playing. Although somewhat threatening to some people, role-playing can be very useful to help people understand some different perspectives by placing them into roles different than the ones they usually occupy. Having neighbors, for instance, role-play a housing developer or planning commissioner can be eye opening.
6. Nominal Group Process. As one technique for structuring group brainstorming and discussion, the nominal group technique is extremely efficient when conducted properly. An issue is identified, and everyone is given 3"x 5" index cards to write down ideas for about five minutes. The group leader then asks for the ideas to be read off, one idea at a time, going around the room. All non-duplicated ideas are recorded and numbered on a large newsprint pad. Brief questions (for clarification only) are then allowed. At that point, if priorities are wanted, each person is given more cards on which to record the numbers of their preferred items. Votes are then tallied, and then *voilà*, there are your priorities. Discussion can be built into the process at any point, and variations on the process can be made. The key things are the tight structure, the chance to write down items on the cards (less threatening than having to call them out), and the public recording of all items for later discussion and/or vote.
7. Swirling. This method allows very active participation in creating clusters of associated ideas through swirling. In this process, participants write ideas (e.g., goals, priorities solutions, or whatever is called for at that stage of the planning process) on large (at least 5"x 8") cards with sticky backs (or regular index cards with masking tape), stick them on a large wall, and then move them around (swirling) to create clusters of ideas that hang together. This is effective in getting people up and moving (which keeps them awake and attentive) and allows easy reforming of the clusters. This technique is also useful for ordering tasks to get something done: the group can keep rearranging the steps until they arrive at an agreed-on sequence.

8. Rite and Roam and Read. Somewhat akin to the swirling technique is this one in which people write ideas on sheets of newsprint pad and tape them on the wall. Everyone then roams around and reads everyone else's ideas. The neighborhood planner or group leader can then begin a discussion by asking for comments such as common themes or contrasting goals. If need be, the leader can go around and mark key ideas or words with a contrasting color magic marker, but generally the participants will have seen those commonalities themselves.
9. Mechanical Catalyst. This term, for lack of a better one, is used to describe anything that a planner or group leader might use as a stimulator of discussion, such as a slide show, videotape, photographs, map, or model. If people are reluctant to talk, something like this can help trigger comments.

RUNNING EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY MEETINGS

- *Good Meetings*. As mentioned earlier, the community meeting is so widely utilized in neighborhood planning that it deserves some special attention. The neighborhood meeting is valuable because it offers the chance for residents to come together and work on common issues. In the process, they will likely grow individually and as a community, will strengthen their identities as members of that given neighborhood, and will get some important business done. For the neighborhood planner, the meeting is the occasion where you see as much of the neighborhood together as you are ever likely to see. It is a great opportunity to advance the planning work.

Good meetings are ones where people leave feeling satisfied and look forward to the next one, where the people who needed to be there were there and even arrived on time, where everyone stayed until the end, where clear-cut decisions were made, where feelings could be aired, and where conflict was dealt with rather than avoided without the group self-destructing, and where participants felt rewarded for their contributions. Those individuals who conduct the meeting need to be clear on its purpose. Is it simply to put information out, to receive information, to create new ideas, to get people interacting and comfortable with one another, or to make decisions? All of those (and others) are legitimate reasons to have meetings, but each would call for a different format, physical arrangement, schedule, and so on.

- *Agenda*. The second part of staging a successful meeting is preparing the agenda, which defines the group's charge, what it wants to get done, and the order of business. An agenda should be prepared ahead of time and made available to everyone (handed out and/or visibly displayed in large print). Then it is a good idea to ask for approval of the agenda ("Is there anything else anyone wants to put on the agenda?"). In addition to giving everyone ownership of the agenda, this gives the group leader the ability to use the agenda to rule out extraneous discussion that might occur later.

The agenda ought to state both the beginning and the ending time for the meeting: this acts as a self-disciplining device to prevent some people from running on at the mouth. Stating the proposed time allotment for each agenda item also helps frame the discussion. It can also help to state briefly on the agenda what is the expected action for each item (e.g., information item only, discussion, decision). Finally, think carefully about the sequence of items on the agenda. In general, it is best to move from least to most controversial. Important items need to be near the middle since some people invariably arrive late and some leave early.

- *Publicity.* Third on the list of tasks for conducting a successful meeting is getting the word out. A number of ideas about this have been mentioned earlier under outreach methods. The important thing is simply to be sure the word did get out to all residents.
- *Audience Analysis.* Before people arrive and as they are arriving, the alert neighborhood planner and/or the group leader will take the time to do some *audience analysis*. Who's there? Are there many people you have not seen before, who will need updating on the whole planning process? Is there a contingent of people you know oppose the plan, who need to be given a chance to express that? Are there some very elderly and frail people, who may be uncomfortable with the very active format you had planned to use, which calls for small groups to form, break up, and reform?

SAMPLE AGENDA

Community Meeting Agenda
July 12, 1989
7:00-8:00 p.m.

Agenda

Introductions		5 minutes
Review and acceptance of agenda	5	
Overview of planning project (Bonnie Felson)		5
Progress to date (Jack Smedly)		5
Tonight's task: identifying issues exercise (Betty Younger)		30
Presentation on current zoning issue (Planning Office representative)		10
Discussion and possible action on that		15
Looking ahead to next steps (Bonnie)		10
Announcements		
Adjournment		

Note: Thanks to 8th grade home economics class for the refreshments tonight!

- *Physical Arrangements.* The physical arrangements and props for a community meeting can make or break a meeting. Are there chairs, tables, a podium, chalkboard, or a place to tape up newsprint sheets? Are the entrances to the building clearly marked (“Enter here for neighborhood meeting”)? Can you control the heating, lighting, air conditioning, and do you know where those controls are? Is there a need for a mike and do you have one that works? What about a slide projector and screen (and spare bulb)? Do you know where there is a working outlet for the coffee pot? What about parking and exterior lighting? Should you have hired a local teenager to provide childcare? Whose responsibility is it to rearrange and clean up the place? There are a million little details, mostly common sense, but very easy to forget!

The other part of the physical arrangements concerns *seating arrangements*. The best seating arrangement depends on what kind of meeting you hope to have. There are several common arrangements, suited to different kinds of meetings.

A cardinal rule in arranging meetings is “between the janitors,” because they invariably set up long rows of chairs, one in back of the other, the dreariest of arrangements for anything but watching a movie! The secret is to get there early enough so you have the chance to rearrange things. Remember, though, that many people have a reluctance to sit in the front row, and that empty front row can make a meeting seem sparsely attended, even when there is a decent turnout. If, when you first arrive at the meeting room, you set up just one or two rows of chairs, and add others behind those rows as people arrive, you will in effect have forced early arrivals into the front rows and make it seem like the place is packed! This entails some monitoring to be sure you set up chairs when needed, always keeping a few empty chairs available.

- *Roles.* There are a few key roles to be played by group leaders at community meetings, namely, the convener, the facilitator, and the scribe. The *convener* is the chairperson or president, or whoever will be running the meeting. This person must be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the attendees in order to be effective. He or she has the authority then to decide how to use the agenda to get the business done. In the early phases of a neighborhood planning process, it may well be that the planner will need to chair the meetings, until sufficient leadership develops from among the residents (assuming there is not yet a viable neighborhood association). Of course, this responsibility should then be turned over to the residents as soon as possible. A planner and a resident working in tandem is another possible arrangement. Still one other way to run the meeting is for a resident to be the overall convener, turning the meeting over to the planner for certain sections where the planner has more of the information needed for that phase of the meeting. What is most important is to make sure before the meeting that everyone has the same understanding of what is going to happen and who is going to do what, so that the meeting will flow smoothly.

Sometimes at a community meeting, it is helpful to have another person who is confident in using some of the techniques discussed earlier so as to manage the discussion. This is the *facilitator*, whose task it is to encourage the flow of discussion, yet keep it within the agreed-on bounds (of time and topic). This person is not a leader so much as a traffic cop, attending as much to the process of the discussion as to the content. The facilitator does not express his or her own views, but encourages others to do so, drawing out the silent, controlling the overly verbal, encouraging a healthy clash of ideas, and not letting anyone stomp on anyone else's ideas.

Again, the planner may fill the role of facilitator at some stages of work, such as early discussions of problems, issues, and overall goals. Later on, the planner might need to be more involved in the discussion than is appropriate for a facilitator.

In addition to the facilitator, it may be useful to have a *scribe*, that is, a public note taker. This person, armed with many colored magic markers, a fat pad of newsprint paper (at least 24"x 36"), tape, and/or push pins, makes a public record of the key points of the meeting. This public record also helps to stimulate conversation and serves as a group memory, as it were. The scribe's first qualification is being able to print clearly; other important challenges include listening closely and summarizing comments in a few words. Sometimes, the facilitator and the scribe are one and the same person. However, this can put an unreasonable burden on the person, so that having two people is preferred.

Any neighborhood planner can be expected to assume the scribe role at some meetings, and by virtue of professional training, should be equipped to fill the role. The planner in most circumstances would also be responsible for making sure all the needed supplies are on hand. Having a kit with markers, push pins, tape, etc. assembled is a must.