



≡ CIVIC ≡  
ENGAGEMENT

TOOLKIT

PUBLIC LIFE  
FOUNDATION  
OF OWENSBORO

# A Civic Engagement Resource Guide

## Why ask the people?

In our participatory democracy, substance, civility and transparency should characterize public discourse. Instead, we see how misinformation and rancor can stifle meaningful outcomes. Therefore, it is more important than ever that citizens be informed, engaged and involved.

A public forum, open to all, welcoming all opinions, and deliberating on the options is one of the best ways to examine the perspectives of citizens and to bring them together on any common ground that is found.

## Agree on a goal

The goal you choose may affect how you want to organize the public forum, especially where you want the focus of the discussion to be. So, what is the purpose of your event?

- to educate?
- to demonstrate to public officials and business leaders that there is support for various initiatives?
- to understand and gain respect for those with different views and experiences?
- to deliberate – and consider the pros/cons, tradeoffs, costs and consequences?
- to seek common ground and positive outcomes?

Agreement here will help keep your organizing committee on track!

## The format and topic

Selecting the best civic engagement format is another important first step.

Among the options:

- a luncheon series
- an after-work “conversation cafe”
- a collaborative community visioning or strategic plan
- a research-based study group with subcommittees and task forces
- workshops and town meetings,
- films, speeches or panels followed by question and answer sessions



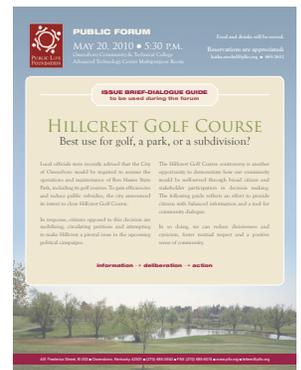
- special sessions with students and more

This toolkit will be based on a small-scale event that focuses on one topic. Participants first receive background information and three or four options facing the community.

Examples:

- Do we need a new public library and, if so, where should it be built?
- Improving prenatal care for the poor
- What are the trade-offs between coal-fired power and other options.
- How do we attract – and hold on to – our best teachers?

The Public Life Advocate, found on the PLFO website, has a significant number of examples you can explore. For this toolkit, we will provide one in-depth example: What should be done with Owensboro’s Hillcrest Golf Course? This example can be useful in seeing how several options for a public decision can be reasonable and practical without being driven by ideology.



## How to organize the project management: an illustration

The type of public forum/discussion you choose will determine how you want to organize your team. Here is one example of how you might organize for a public forum with 150 participants.

- Project manager and event moderator (could be the same person or different people)
- 15 tables of 10 citizens each (a good number for a discussion in which all get to speak and multiple perspectives are present)
- 15 facilitators to lead the discussion, one at each table

- 15 recorders to keep notes (reported at the forum as it progresses and as a permanent record of the discussion for follow-up on the forum, taking next steps)
- Committees
  - Outreach (recruit participants from target constituencies)
  - Fund-raising – sponsorships to attract participants and help offset costs
  - Writing and graphic design (issue brief for participants)
- Registration tools (online, ads, or at other public meetings): Registration is valuable for establishing a database, getting contact information for participants)
- Caterer (food may not be needed, but food helps attract an audience)

## Materials

Each participant will need materials to prepare for the forum. Some can be circulated before hand, especially if it requires several pages of reading. Others can be provided at registration. Here are a few examples of what you might consider giving participants:

- Agenda
- Issue brief/discussion guide
- Small tablets/paper for taking notes
- Prompt questions (for facilitators)

## Whom to attract, whom to recruit

Recruit participants from the general public AND from constituencies that have a specific interest in the topic. Make a special effort to recruit participants who may diverse perspectives. If possible, try to have multiple perspectives at each table. For example, one could give each participant a number (1-15) at event-day registration. These numbers would correspond with a sign on each of the fifteen tables designating its number.

## Next Steps

Be sure to offer closing comments based on reports provided from each of the tables. This is easier if the project manager and the event moderator are two separate people. While the moderator is managing the discussions and table reports, the project manager can look for trends or clear conclusions coming from the tables, providing some tentative conclusions or thoughts about next steps.

Participants can also be invited to offer closing thoughts. A portable microphone is useful for this (as it is for reports from individual tables during the event).

After the meeting, it will be important to collect the reports from the table discussion and create a summary of the key points made. If the team wants to move the project forward, an email can be sent to all participants with the summary of the event.

Volunteers at the tables (recorders and moderators) should be polled to identify individuals at their tables who were particularly valuable in the discussion. These people might be individually asked to join the team or at least to participate in any "next steps." A general invitation to any future activities should also be made to all participants.

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