10 Steps for Creating a Public Participation Plan

Public Participation Plan for:

Project Title

Project Plan Date

Albemarle County Project Manager:

Name/Title/Email
Introduction: Ten Steps for Creating a Public Participation Plan

This document contains 10 steps to help you develop and organize your public participation activities to be effective and meaningful in accomplishing your project goals.

- Whether planning public participation for a large or small project, it is important to address and think through each one of the 10 steps. Most public participation plans will be simple and short – no longer than a two-page memo (check out the sample plans on the Community Relations Public Participation SharePoint site). For large projects with multiple public participation activities, a more detailed plan may be necessary.

- The purpose of your public participation plan is to help you think through the project to design activities that will meet the project’s public participation goals, not to make a huge amount of extra work for you. A well-planned approach to your public participation activities will save you time in the long run.

- Some project goals may even lead you to a public participation plan that calls for little or no public participation. The most important outcome of a public participation plan is that County staff, elected officials, and the public will both be clear on the appropriate level and goals of public participation activities for a given project.

- If consultants are leading the public participation efforts for a project, a public participation plan addressing these steps is also necessary.

Contact Community Relations for Guidance and Final Approval

The Community Relations Department is your resource for guidance and support for the development of your Participation Plan. You are encouraged to contact Community Relations early in the process.

1. Once you have drafted the plan, and before starting implementation, submit a copy to the Community Relations Director for review and approval.

2. The approved plan should be made available to the general public and project participants by posting it on the Albemarle County website as well as by providing electronic or hard copies, as appropriate.
**The Ten Steps**

**Step 1: Describe the Project**

The first step in developing a public participation plan is to provide a clear project description to lay the foundation for a successful and achievable public participation process within the timeline, geographic area, staff and budget limitations of the overall project. This information will be used to explain the project to those persons subsequently engaged in public participation activities of the Plan. This will also help communicate the boundaries of public participation in planning, program development or decision processes.

*Example: This project will focus on the creation of a master plan for the long term development of Western Park in Crozet. During the course of this project, other recreational facilities desired for the Crozet community may be identified that are not able to be accommodated in Western Park — planning for those facilities will be the subject of a future project and will not be within the scope of this project. Work Product for this Project — completed master plan for presentation to the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors.*

**Step 2: Assess Level of Public Concern or Interest**

To determine the appropriate level of public participation, it is important to assess the degree to which the public considers the issue significant. The public will become involved according to its perception of the seriousness of the issue. Therefore, it is important to anticipate the public’s level of interest or concern regarding a project or program. The Assessment Worksheet on the next page will help you think about questions you might ask to gauge the level of public interest or concern.
Worksheet for Step 2: Assessing Public Interest and Concern

The results of this worksheet can give you a general sense of the level of public participation recommended for the project. You may have additional questions that are important to the community to include in this assessment. In addition, a minimum level of public participation may be prescribed by regulation or federal grant requirements, in which case this worksheet might be useful in determining whether the minimum level is sufficient or a higher level should be considered. As you assess public interest or concern, be aware that the minimum level of public participation will be public information and education. If any marks register at the “very high” level, careful evaluation should be given to the level of public participation even if the average score was otherwise low.

Complete this assessment with all members of the project team at the table. If you’re doing this online, double-click on the table below to activate Excel, and the worksheet will automatically calculate the desired public participation level after you enter an “x” to assess each question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Questions</th>
<th>Very Low Level 1</th>
<th>Low Level 2</th>
<th>Moderate Level 3</th>
<th>High Level 4</th>
<th>Very High Level 5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the anticipated level of conflict, concern controversy, or opportunity on this or related issues?</td>
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<td>2. How significant are the potential impacts to the public?</td>
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<td>3. How much do the major stakeholders care about this issue, project or program?</td>
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<td>4. What degree of involvement does the public appear to desire?</td>
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<td>5. What is the potential for public impact on the potential decision or project?</td>
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<td>6. How significant are the possible benefits of involving the public?</td>
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<td>7. How serious are the potential ramifications of NOT involving the public?</td>
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<td>8. What level of public participation does the Board of Supervisors desire or expect?</td>
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<td>9. What is the possibility that the media will become interested?</td>
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<td>10. What is the probable level of difficulty in solving the problem or advancing the project?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Count number of checks in each column

Multiply number of checks by level number

Total all 5 columns

Divide by 10 to calculate desired level of Public Participation on the Spectrum
Step 3: Determine Level of Public Concern or Interest

After assessing the level of public interest or concern using the worksheet in Step 2, it will be easier to plan for the appropriate level of public participation and establish effective goals. The Public Participation Spectrum below illustrates the four levels of public participation: Public Information, Public Input, Public Involvement and Public Collaboration. Each of these levels serves a different purpose with a different outcome. A public participation plan will almost always require more than one level of participation.

Based on your results from the assessment worksheet in Step 2, use the “Public Participation Spectrum” below to identify the appropriate level of public participation for your project. Note that each level has a different obligation and outcome.

- Enter the average score from the Assessment Worksheet in Step #2: ___
- Identify the public participation level using the Public Participation Spectrum below: ___

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inform (1 - 1.9)</th>
<th>Solicit Input / Consult (2 - 2.9)</th>
<th>Involve (3 - 3.9)</th>
<th>Collaborate (4 - 4.9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-way communication between Albemarle County and the public to provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions. Seek public feedback on a proposal, analysis or alternatives. Requires a response from the public, but limited opportunity for public dialogue. Work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that issues, aspirations and concerns are consistently understood and considered. Includes elements of public information and outreach, but adds a third dimension of two-way communication. To collaborate with the public on some or all aspects of the planning or decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</td>
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Promise to the Public

- We will keep stakeholders informed.
- We will keep stakeholders informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns, aspirations and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
- We will work with stakeholders to ensure that their concerns, aspirations and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
- We will look to stakeholders for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate their recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.

Example of Tools to use

- Fact sheet
- Press Release
- Open House
- Tour / Site Visit
- Public Meeting
- Appreciative Inquiry
- Focus Group
- Survey
- Workshop
- Design Charrettes
- Citizen advisory committee
- Board-appointed commission
- Special task force

Adapted from the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum
Step 4: Identify Public Participation Goals

After determining the appropriate level of public participation for the project, the next step is to define your goals for inviting the public to participate. Refer to the “Promise to the Public” list in the Public Participation Spectrum in Step 3 as you refine your goals. You may also mix different levels of participation, along with media and public outreach components, in your goals.

Here are questions to consider as you develop your goals:

Could this be an opportunity to . . .

- Create a better project
- Incorporate other community goals into the project
- Benefit from public input, involvement or support regarding the project
- Collaborate with citizens or organizations in overlapping areas
- Raise visibility of County government in the local community
- Enhance specific project milestones or decision processes
- Promote good news, programs or projects sponsored by Albemarle County Government
- Strengthen or repair public trust

Example goals:
- Gather public feedback about community desires for the ultimate future of Western Park
- Establish realistic expectations about the schedule for improvements to the park
- Provide transparent process for how public input is used in developing project alternatives
- Disseminate community input to ultimate decision makers for their consideration
Step 5: Identify Stakeholders

With goals and public participation levels in hand, it is easier to identify stakeholders and what level of public outreach is needed. When creating your list of stakeholders, make sure you think about audiences that may not typically be engaged, to try to cover a broad range of citizens.

Example Stakeholders:
- Crozet Park Board
- Crozet Community Advisory Council
- Crozet Community Association
- Old Trail developers
- Crozet residents
- County residents
Step 6: Select Tools

Different public participation goals typically require different tools and approaches. The Public Participation Toolkit on the Community Relations Public Participation website gives you a list of recommended tools for each of the four levels of public participation, making it easier to pick tools and activities that match public expectations and the desired level of participation. Carefully considering public participation goals for the project can also provide guidance on whether or not a combination of activities will help you reach the desired outcome.

Example:

If your public participation level is Public Involvement (work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that issues, aspirations, and concerns are consistently understood and considered and provide feedback on how public input influenced decisions about the project), you would check that level in the toolkit and see which types of activities are suggested, then choose the activity or activities that fit your budget, timeline, goals, staff resources, etc.

Tools/activities:

- Kick off meeting with Master Plan Committee
- Field trip/site tour opportunity for Master Plan Committee
- Public workshop to analyze existing conditions and generate ideas for what elements should be included in the park master plan including small group discussion
- Provide opportunity online and in Crozet location for ideas about the master plan
- Based on information gathered through analysis and public feedback, preliminary master plan is prepared and presented for review and comments to CCAC, CCA, Crozet Park Board, Old Trail developers, Master Plan Committee, Community open house, Planning Commission, Board of Supervisors
- Based on feedback gained through draft plan public review, final master plan will be drafted and presented to the following for final review and comments: Master Plan Committee, Crozet community
- Review process then shifts into legally defined process – Master Plan Committee has completed their charge at this point, community will have on-going public involvement as outlined in the legally defined process i.e. public work sessions and public hearing
- Planning Commission
- Board of Supervisors
Step 7: Create a Schedule

Any public participation plan should include a detailed timeline of the planning, program development or decision-making processes as well as the public participation activities within that process. Public information and input need to be timed early enough to provide the public adequate opportunity to influence the decision.

For this step, we recommend creating a schedule/adding dates for the activities list you’ve defined in Step 6. If you like, you can combine steps 6 and 7 in your public participation plan.
Step 8: Identify Roles and Responsibilities

Identify everyone who has a role and/or responsibility in the planning, program development or decision making processes. Most importantly, identify an overall public participation manager responsible for tracking progress and completing each activity. **Clearly identify who your “ultimate decision makers” are with regard to the project.** This will be very helpful to have before beginning the development of public information materials and making presentations to stakeholders, who will want to know how, when and by whom the decision is going to be made.

*Example:*

*Staff* – work with consultant and the community to develop the master plan to present to the Planning Commission and Master Plan, ensure the effectiveness of the public participation process, provide review and recommendations to the ultimate decision makers in accordance with established county policies and plans, keep community informed about progress of the plan through legal review process

*Consultant* – work with staff and the community to develop the master plan, record and honor public input, communicate how public input has shaped decisions about the plan, present master plan to the Planning Commission to start legal review process

*Master Plan Committee* – defined in committee charge

*Planning Commission* – review Master Plan, work with staff to resolve outstanding issues, hold a public hearing to gather community input, make a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors

*Board of Supervisors* – review Master Plan and Planning Commission recommendation, work with staff to resolve any outstanding issues, hold a public hearing to gather community input, vote to adopt the Master Plan
Step 9: Gather and Disseminate Input and Results

If your public participation goals include public input, involvement or collaboration, you have the added responsibility of disseminating the public’s input to decision makers and back to the public at large. This “feedback loop” is necessary to demonstrate to the public that their time and effort has been well invested and their comments and concerns have been understood and accurately communicated to decision makers. It also shows the public how their input has been translated and influenced the project, policy or program.

Note: The UVA Center for Survey Research Focus Group on communication in August 2007, found that “some participants felt that County decisions were offered as a “done deal” and even when residents gave their opinion, it was not heeded.” We need to make it clear that decisions are made for many reasons, and it is important that the why’s are understood the community, even if not agreed with. And while County government places a high value on input from our citizens, if the public doesn’t perceive that we value their contributions, then we haven’t done our jobs. This is not to say that we can make everyone happy, or use every suggestion that is given to us. But we do need to let people know how/why we have/have not used their input.

Example: The plan will ensure dissemination of public input to decision makers and back to the public at large to demonstrate how comments and concerns have been recorded and understood and accurately communicated. It will also show the public how their input has been translated and how it influenced the outcome of the project. Examples of the feedback loop include:

- The Western Park website will be kept up to date on all meetings and other events
- All comments generated at public meetings will be recorded and available for review on the county website and will be available for decision-makers during their review
- Major revisions to the plan will be communicated to the community prior to being presented to either the Planning Commission or the Board of Supervisors
- A Western Park Amail list will be established to keep interested citizens up to date
- Press releases and other materials will be sent out as appropriate to keep the community informed about the progress of the project
- A community open house will be held in Crozet as the plan moves from the preliminary to the final design stage
Step 10: Evaluate Effectiveness

Evaluation should be an explicit part of the design for any public participation activity or plan. Too often, evaluation is ignored or begun too late to help improve the project. Involving stakeholders in designing and conducting the evaluation is a further way of partnering with the public and creating a transparent process. Plan to constantly monitor and evaluate the outcomes of its public participation efforts throughout the life of the project and make revisions as needed.

Example:
We will use evaluation as an ongoing tool to assess and improve the public participation plan as the project moves forward, including the following strategies:
- Informal feedback
- Questionnaires/surveys
- End of project evaluation to see if goals are met – will reassemble the Master Plan Committee for this purpose

Many thanks to the Portland Development Commission for sharing their 10-steps guide, which served as the foundation for this process.