

Public Outreach and Participation

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UNC
SCHOOL OF
GOVERNMENT

About the Series

Local Government Board Builders offers local elected leaders practical advice on how to effectively lead and govern. Each of the booklets in this series provides a topic overview, specific tips on effective practice, and worksheets and reflection questions to help local elected leaders improve their work. The series focuses on common activities for local governing boards, such as selecting and appointing committees and advisory boards, planning for the future, making better decisions, improving board accountability, and effectively engaging stakeholders in public decisions.

Vaughn Mamlin Upshaw, lecturer in public administration and government at the UNC School of Government, is the series editor.

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Introduction

City and county elected officials hear from their constituents all the time. Yet there is often confusion about how public participation* occurs and how it affects decision making by municipal and county boards. This guide provides specific ideas for

- When and how to engage the public
- What to think about in designing a variety of participation mechanisms, such as surveys, hearings, and community meetings
- How to be more inclusive, regardless of what participation method is used
- How to develop long-term community participation by partnering with civic organizations and involving youth in local government

Public officials need to think beyond particular tools to the broader plan for what they want to accomplish through various types of public participation. All the tips in this guide depend on officials' goals and visions for informed, involved residents in their communities.

This guide covers common forms of structured participation, such as citizen comment periods at regular city council or county commission meetings and public hearings. It notes some higher-tech possibilities such as using social media. It offers practical guidance on both traditional and innovative ways of involving the public.

Part 1 focuses on the big picture: the whys, whens, and hows of public participation. It examines several issues public leaders should consider in choosing among various participation methods. Part 2 offers practical tips for disseminating information and engaging the public.

*Almost all North Carolina communities have residents who are not U.S. citizens. Community leaders choose to what degree these noncitizens can and should participate in local decision making. References to “public participation” in this publication should be taken to mean participation by all residents of a city or county, regardless of citizenship status. Terms such as “citizens academy” and “citizen advisory committee” should also be considered inclusive of all members of a community.

A separate Board Builders publication, *Creating and Maintaining Effective Local Government Citizen Advisory Committees*, by Vaughn Mamlin Upshaw, focuses on city council-appointed advisory committees and county and regional advisory boards.