
Listening to Citizens

County Commissioners on the Road



DEBRA HENZEY, JOHN B. STEPHENS, AND PATRICK LIEDTKA

Buncombe, Catawba, and Halifax Counties experimented with citizen-outreach efforts in 1997. (Left to right): Buncombe County government buildings with their mountain backdrop, the Catawba County Government Center, and Halifax County's Historic Courthouse.

Courtesy of (left to right) Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, Catawba County, and Halifax County

North Carolina local governments have made numerous kinds of efforts to “get the word out” to citizens—for example, broadcasting their meetings via cable television and setting up World Wide Web sites.¹ Such outreach is useful, but there is an equal, perhaps even greater, need to receive feedback from a broad range of citizens—to hear and respond to their questions, concerns, and criticisms.

This article describes and analyzes recent efforts by three boards of county commissioners to learn about citizens’ concerns by convening meetings away from the county seat. In essence, these boards went “on the road” to reach citizens. Their efforts were distinct from the use of task forces or advisory committees by many local governments in North Carolina. There was no set agenda and no effort to move toward a resolution of problems. The primary goal was simply to listen and respond to citizens’ concerns on topics of their choosing. The general focus was to encourage participation from people who are not normally active in political and civic affairs, instead of hearing more from a handful of activists who regularly interact with the commissioners. The key elements of the efforts are described in detail in the following sections and are summarized in Table 1. (For ways to obtain more information, see page 20.)

Henzey is communications director for the N.C. Association of County Commissioners. Stephens is an Institute of Government faculty member. Liedtka, a graduate student in public administration and social work, researched and wrote the section on Catawba County.

TABLE 1. CITIZEN-OUTREACH EFFORTS AT A GLANCE

County	Purpose	Format	Schedule	
Buncombe	To listen and respond to concerns of citizens in different parts of county.	Specially called meetings in rural communities. Citizens' comments and questions, with replies and discussion from board. Session facilitated by board chair. All 5 commissioners attended.	13 meetings held over 16 weeks on Tuesday nights during fall 1997, most lasting 2 hours.	<p>KEY OUTCOMES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drew more than 1,500 citizens. • Gave public access to firsthand information. • Provided quick fixes to simple problems. • Offered county officials insight on important issues. • Identified new people to serve on boards and committees. • Led to revised formats for regional hearings on land use. • Provided brief civics lesson on what county government can and cannot do. • Gave citizens personal contact with elected officials and top managers. • Exposed staff to citizens' perspectives. • Exhausted staff and commissioners. <p>LESSONS LEARNED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide forms for participants to submit written comments. • Collect participants' names, addresses, and telephone numbers. • Supply pocket-sized reference cards listing county contacts. • Use roundtables of employees to identify potential issues from their communities. • Survey participants on key issues. • Be sensitive to timing of meetings. • Use nonschool sites. • Don't skimp on funds to publicize meetings. • Pace schedule more realistically.
Catawba	As part of National Association of Counties' Community Countdown 2000 project, to get input from small groups of citizens on key issues facing county.	Adult roundtables held in schools in 4 regions of county, open to all interested residents. One roundtable for high school students who were selected to represent their schools. A commissioner attended each roundtable.	Held during National County Government Week in April 1997: adult roundtables, 2 on Tuesday night, 2 on Thursday night; student roundtable on Saturday morning.	<p>KEY OUTCOMES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drew 45 (range 6 to 18) citizens to four adult roundtables. • Attracted 36 participants to student roundtable. • Did not bring in many new people; most adults had been involved before. • Led to 8 more sessions in fall 1998, involving high school students. • Provided data consistent with issues identified in telephone survey of 190 residents. <p>LESSONS LEARNED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep expectations modest—not all initiatives will work. • Personally invite specific groups or individuals if their attendance is important. • Identify specific topics for discussion. • Take time to explain how to participate in various types of government forums. • Network through existing groups to find spokespersons who have credibility with their groups.
Halifax	To implement board's goal of more effectively reaching county residents who might not be able to get to county seat.	Citizen-input periods held before regular monthly work sessions. Opened with reports from selected department heads, then period for citizens' questions and comments. All residents invited to attend.	Held monthly throughout 1997 in 11 communities. Public input originally set for 30 minutes but often lasted more than 1 hour.	<p>KEY OUTCOMES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drew about 520 residents. • Helped prioritize issues, even when actions already were under way. • Interfered with work session agendas. • Led to fewer input sessions in 1998. • Also led to reporting back to citizens in 1998 on several actions taken related to 1997 meetings. <p>LESSONS LEARNED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold meetings separate from board work sessions. • Avoid summer meetings because they are poorly attended. • Meet quarterly to place less strain on board and staff. • Provide contact information on noncounty issues, such as roads and schools. • Use some time to educate people about key initiatives. • Make sure meeting chair has good facilitation skills. • Expect the unexpected, such as late-breaking controversies. • Provide good maps of county as reference points. • Follow through on commitments.

Many other counties and cities have implemented innovative ways to understand citizen sentiment and respond to individual or neighborhood problems (see “Other Examples of Community Outreach,” page 21). We chose Buncombe, Catawba, and Halifax Counties

because of the different goals, designs, and results of their outreach efforts. Through this variety we identify guidelines that local government officials should consider in planning and evaluating their own citizen-participation efforts.



Buncombe

[WEEKLY MEETINGS ALL FALL]

During fall 1997 the Buncombe County commissioners hosted thirteen community meetings for “the sole purpose of finding out what was on people’s minds—for us to get to know them better and for them to get to know us better,” said Tom Sobol, chair. “We really wanted to listen to their concerns and give them an easier way to be part of government.”

The attendance of more than 1,500 citizens surprised many county leaders. Most meeting sites were filled to capacity.

The entire board of commissioners participated at each meeting. The meetings were held almost every Tuesday night from September through the middle of December, starting at 7:00 P.M. and lasting until around 9:00 P.M., or as long as people wanted to talk and ask questions. The chair presided over the discussion, but other commissioners and staff often responded to questions and comments.

A Citizen Stakeholders’ Committee advised the board on follow-up to the community meetings. Already the county is building on input to develop a strategy on land-use planning, always a controversial issue. Also, the commissioners planned to revisit some of the communities later in 1998 or early in 1999.

Impetus

The idea for the community meetings grew out of several related events and initiatives. First, during 1996 and early 1997, Buncombe County and Asheville had worked together on a countywide “visioning” process (involving dozens of people in creating a long-term picture for their community), Asheville/Buncombe VISION. As stated in the final VISION report, a key strategy identified through this process was the adoption of “public participation processes that explicitly acknowledge that public input improves the quality of decision-making.”²

The call for more effective public-participation processes coincided with formation of the Citizen Stakeholders’ Committee in early 1997 to develop criteria for hiring a new county manager. “This committee generated great energy and was openly eager to stay involved,” related Deborah Hay, the county’s community liaison. “We sought ways to build on that enthusiasm.”

Further, in fall 1996 all five commissioners had made public input part of their election platforms. They recognized that they had a large county with mountainous terrain that made it hard for some people to get to the county seat.

Finally, Hay continued, when Assistant County Manager Wanda Greene was promoted to county manager in spring 1997, she expressed an interest “in getting to know the people of the county better so that she could more fully appreciate the diverse needs and issues facing each community.” So, said Hay, “all the county leaders had lined up on the participation diving board. They were just waiting for a push to jump in.”

Key Players

Given all the momentum generated by VISION and the Citizen Stakeholders’ Committee, there was no shortage of advocates for holding the community meetings. Sobol and Greene began to seek input on how to format and schedule the meetings to be most effective.

Two key staff members involved in planning the logistics and promoting attendance were Hay and Jill Thompson, public information coordinator. They worked with the Cooperative Extension Service and other grass-roots organizations to select the meeting sites.

Several important members of county government staff attended all the community meetings. Other high-

CONTACT INFORMATION

BUNCOMBE COUNTY

Wanda Greene, county manager, (828) 250-4100,
bunco.manager@mindspring.com

Deborah Hay, community liaison, (828) 250-4001

Look for contact information for other Buncombe officials on the county's Web site at
<http://www.buncombecounty.org/commissioners/index.htm>.

CATAWBA COUNTY

Robert Hibbitts, chair, Catawba County Board of Commissioners, (828) 323-8324

Dave Hardin, public information officer, (828) 465-8464

Look for contact information for other Catawba officials on the county's Web site at
<http://www.co.catawba.nc.us/>.

HALIFAX COUNTY

Charles Archer, county manager, (252) 583-1131,
archerc@halifaxnc.com

Doug Hewett, public information officer,
(252) 583-1668, hewettd@halifaxnc.com

Look for contact information for other Halifax officials on the county's Web site at
<http://www.halifaxnc.com/halifax.html>.

INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENT

Gordon Whitaker, Citizenship Project, (919) 962-0427,
whitaker@iogmail.iog.unc.edu

John B. Stephens, Public Dispute Resolution Program,
(919) 962-5190, stephens@iogmail.iog.unc.edu

level managers attended only a few. Jon Creighton, assistant county manager and planning director, expected low attendance and a large proportion of complainants. Joe Connolly, county attorney, was somewhat concerned that a few vocal groups would dominate the meetings or try to embarrass the board. "However," he related, "the process worked because the board was willing and able to provide reasonable answers to hard questions."

The members of the Citizen Stakeholders' Committee provided support by attending at least one or two meetings in their part of the county and by taking notes from a citizen's viewpoint. "They served as our neutral eyes and ears," said Commissioner David Gantt.

Structure of the Meetings

Initially the outreach meetings were to be held over a much longer period, but the manager and key staff agreed that they should not coincide with meetings on revaluation of property or hearings on land-use planning. "To beat this deadline, we had to speed up the schedule," Hay said. "Also, we had built up some momentum through the Citizen Stakeholders' Committee and positive coverage from the news media. We had to take advantage of that."

In 1995 the county had held similar meetings at school sites, which were not very successful. "We learned that the school sites drew people interested mainly in school issues and that we needed to advertise more," said Commissioner Bill Stanley.

Before the meetings Greene convened groups of employees from various areas of the county to help identify issues that might arise at the meetings in their communities. "This not only helped us plan for what topics might come up," Greene said, "but it served to build relationships among employees in different departments who live in the same community." The county scheduled the 1997 meetings at "neutral" sites such as rural fire stations and community centers. They devoted funds to advertising in the daily newspapers and on television. "We also rented a lighted, portable marquee sign to place at or near the upcoming meeting site," reported Hay. The total budget for the meetings, primarily for advertising and promotion, was around \$20,000.

Sobol began each meeting by explaining that there was no set agenda—that commissioners wanted to hear from the people. When participants hesitated to ask the first question, the board and the staff filled in with information on key projects. A high school video-production class taped each session. The tape was aired on local cable television at 9:00 P.M. on Thursday nights. "I'm amazed at the number of people who have recognized me from those tapings," says Greene. "It was a great way to reach people who could not get to the meetings."

The county did not ask communities to provide refreshments, but at every site an auxiliary group volunteered to provide tasty treats—always a pleasant thank you for participants. Staff took notes on any actions required and afterward developed a matrix to track what had been done related to issues or questions at the meetings. The county sent thank-you letters to all citizens who spoke. In fall 1998 it held another 13 meetings at the same sites.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Many other local governments across the state have pursued various ways of increasing public input. Those listed below responded to an August 1998 e-mail request by the authors and are willing to be contacted by North Carolina public officials for additional information. We have provided very short summaries of their efforts.

ASHEVILLE

Asheville continues its work on implementing community-oriented government. So far that has included the following:

1. Community meetings: relatively unstructured meetings held by the city council in months with a fifth Tuesday. The council initiated these sessions about four years ago.
2. Roundtables: a new format to help the city determine solutions to specific issues, such as litter control. The process solicits views from key stakeholders but also reaches out to the general public.
3. Staff initiatives: a variety of methods to implement community-based government, such as surveys, street interviews, stakeholder priority committees, and ordinance review. Many employees also are undergoing extensive training in conflict resolution and facilitation of public groups.

Contact Robin Westbrook, community-oriented government coordinator, (828) 259-5484, rlw2@cityhall.ci.asheville.nc.us.

CALDWELL COUNTY

After the 1996 elections, the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners undertook several initiatives for improved citizen outreach:

1. Quarterly community board meetings: regular board meetings held four times a year in a different unincorporated community. The first forty-five to sixty minutes are set aside for public comments and questions. The board asks major department heads to attend so that they may hear and respond to citizens' perspectives. The meetings are shown several times on cable access stations.
2. Meetings with municipal bodies: joint meetings between the county board of commissioners and every elected municipal board in the county, to enhance the county board's understanding of specific issues in the municipalities.
3. Citizen slots on the planning board: expansion of the planning board to include one citizen from every municipality and the major unincorporated areas.

Contact John Thuss, chair, Caldwell County Board of Commissioners, (828) 728-6713, jthuss@co.caldwell.nc.us.

CLEVELAND COUNTY

The Cleveland County Board of Commissioners recently started holding four of its regular board meetings at different locations in the county. Also, on the basis of the outcome of a survey conducted by the Urban Institute, the

county created Cleveland Tomorrow, a group of community leaders charged with addressing county challenges.

Contact Lane Alexander, county manager, (704) 484-4800, lane.alexander@countynt2.co.cleveland.nc.us.

MATTHEWS

Each year Matthews Mayor R. Lee Myers has called four to five town meetings. Typically they are held in one of the neighborhood-association clubhouses, but one takes place in a large retirement-community complex. Council members and staff sometimes attend. In fall 1998 the town planned to host a meeting at a public park, offering free hot dogs and hamburgers, along with a chance to talk with the mayor, board members, and staff.

Contact Ralph Messera, town manager, (704) 847-4411, ralphm@perigee.net.

POLK COUNTY

During 1998 the Polk County Board of Commissioners and the Polk County Planning Board held a series of public meetings around the county, primarily to get input on land-use issues. The meetings, which used a trained facilitator, took place on the same dates as regular board of commissioners meetings. The boards devoted a portion of the time to open discussion, which focused on such topics as taxation, county parks, and speed limits. Attendance ranged from fifty to eighty people.

Contact Mark Maxwell, planning and community development director, (828) 894-3301, maxwell@teleplex.net.

ROCKINGHAM COUNTY

The county has undertaken several initiatives to increase citizen participation:

1. Future Development Task Force: a group of stakeholders, commissioners, and citizens at large that scheduled five facilitated County/Town Drop-In Sessions to get input on affordable, quality housing for low-income residents. The meetings were held at different high schools across the county.
2. Animal Control Task Force: a stakeholders group that has held several public hearings on issues related to control of dangerous animals.
3. Water-Sewer Task Force: a fourteen-member group created in June 1998, when a large group of citizens opposed the formation of a water-sewer authority.

Contact Ginger Waynick, director, Public Information/Veterans' Office, (336) 342-8449.

Outcomes

Although many long-term outcomes are still undetermined, county officials have identified numerous immediate results that they considered positive:

1. People had access to firsthand information (instead of rumors or news reports) on proposed junk-vehicle ordinances and the process for public input on land-use planning.
2. The county provided some “quick fixes” for simple problems, such as putting someone in touch with the right person or arranging for an inspector to look at junk cars.
3. The county developed a new list of people who were willing to serve on county government committees or wanted to stay informed.
4. The meetings provided insight into citizens’ concerns on a few controversial issues, such as annexation and land-use planning.
5. The meetings served a secondary purpose as a civics lesson. For example, more than a few residents learned that counties do not repair roads or make school policies. County staff put them in touch with the responsible agencies.
6. Participants’ comments and body language suggested that a majority came to the meetings with some coolness or skepticism but many left with a more open attitude about their county government. A letter to the editor in the November 27, 1997, issue of the *Asheville Times-Citizen* reinforces this point. Carolyn Dickinsen of Riceville wrote that she went to a meeting to speak against city annexation efforts. “What I gained from the meeting was much more. For two hours, neighbors voiced concerns and fears,” and commissioners listened to them, expressed sympathy, and provided possible solutions. “I felt a part of the community, and my neighbors’ cares and worries became mine.”³
7. County staff had a chance to hear what people really thought about issues staff dealt with in their jobs.
8. The Citizen Stakeholders’ Committee used information from the meetings to make recommendations to the Land Use Planning Steering Committee, such as providing training in facilitation for the committee members.
9. A summary report from each meeting indicated common concerns and unique concerns.



Catawba

[5 ROUNDTABLES IN A WEEK]

During County Government Week in April 1997, Catawba County convened four adult roundtables and one student roundtable. At least one commissioner attended each. To supplement the input gained from the roundtables with scientifically valid research, the county also surveyed 190 residents by telephone.

The county’s effort drew on Community Countdown 2000, a national model for asking citizens to guide boards of county commissioners in defining the top two or three priorities for their attention. An initiative of the National Association of Counties, it calls for strong efforts (such as surveys and meetings) to reach a diverse set of citizens (persons of different ages, with a variety of professional and work experience, and from different kinds of communities across the county), including roundtables of citizens to reach some agreement on the one or two most important topics or problems facing the county. Thus a county

board might have a better idea of citizens’ needs and priorities.⁴

Purpose

In addition to seeking input from a broad range of people to identify the top issues in the county, Catawba public officials hoped to recruit qualified volunteers to serve on county boards. They sought some way to move beyond the voices and the views of the same few individuals who regularly participated in county board meetings. They also wanted to reach citizens in another way than at a meeting that draws large numbers because a controversial school or zoning issue has raised concerns. “It’s more difficult than we recognized to get people involved,” said Robert Hibbitts, chair of the Catawba County Board of Commissioners. “We have to make a special effort. This

effort is another tool in terms of involving volunteers and improving services.”

Impetus

Efforts like those described in this article often take someone who has a lot of faith—maybe a little blind faith—that something new will involve more citizens in local government. Dave Hardin, the county’s public information officer, was the motivating force behind Catawba’s effort. In February 1997 Hardin attended an information session of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners on the Community Countdown 2000 project and was impressed by the enthusiasm the project generated for enhancing citizen involvement.

When Hardin presented his idea for the project to County Manager Tom Lundy, he found that his enthusiasm was not shared. “Tom had more experience with these things than I did,” said Hardin. “He thought that people only got involved with NIMBY [not in my back yard] concerns.” Despite skepticism the manager suggested that Hardin take his proposal to the county commissioners.

The commissioners enthusiastically supported Hardin’s proposal and urged him to organize the sessions with their backing. They hoped that increased publicity would result in better attendance than previous efforts had generated. “We’d held meetings in the community before,” said Commissioner Barbara Beatty, “and we hadn’t had much of a turnout—only two or three people.”

Structure of the Meetings and the Survey

Catawba County held the four adult roundtables in different locations—one in each quadrant of the county—to ensure that citizens had access to a session within a reasonable distance of their home. The meetings took place in three high schools and a new elementary school. Prominent newspaper advertisements in the weeks leading up to the meetings invited the public to attend. Two of the meetings were held on Tuesday, April 15, and two on Thursday, April 17. They were scheduled on these days to avoid conflicts with Monday evening board meetings and Wednesday night church services. Each meeting lasted approximately two hours. In the two larger meetings (fifteen and eighteen participants, respectively), the commissioners split the participants into three discussion groups. In the smaller meetings, participants discussed issues as one

group. Because the goal of the meetings was to identify issues facing the county, not to discuss any one issue in detail, the county used trained facilitators from the Co-operative Extension Service to lead the sessions and to ensure that conversation did not bog down or become too adversarial.

The student roundtable took place in a middle school in the center of the county, scheduled on a Saturday to ensure that students did not miss class or homework time. All forty-two public and private schools in the county were invited to send a student, and thirty-six of them did. Individuals experienced in working with young people moderated the discussion when the large session divided into five small groups.

Wayne King and Dale King, both professors at Lenoir-Rhyne College, organized the survey piece of the outreach. Nine undergraduate business students conducted the telephone surveys during the same week as the roundtable meetings. Approximately 120 of the 190 citizens contacted completed the survey. Five issues received the most mentions (see Table 2).

Outcomes

Catawba County public officials view the results of their 1997 effort as mixed. Two of the adult roundtables were fairly well attended, whereas the other two roundtables drew only six citizens each. There was significant overlap in the issues identified through the survey and the roundtables. The adult

TABLE 2. ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN CATAWBA COUNTY

Issues Raised in Telephone Survey (ranked by number of mentions)
1. Education
2. Taxes—cut, or spend more wisely
3. Immigration
4. Public safety
5. Transportation
(Six other topics received one or two mentions.)
Issues Raised through Roundtables All five issues above were raised in the roundtables. Two additional issues discussed were as follows:
1. Environment
2. Breakup of family
Final List Presented to Board (ranked by total number of mentions)
1. Education
2. Environment
3. Transportation
4. Immigration/diverse cultures
5. Breakup of family
6. Public safety

roundtables also identified the environment and breakup of the family as significant concerns. Breakup of the family was a top concern at the youth roundtable.

Discouraging for Hardin was the dearth of new faces among those who attended the adult roundtables. "There wasn't anybody involved who hadn't been there before," he said.

The most successful of the meetings was the student roundtable, which drew a packed house of thirty-six young people and generated significant coverage in the local media. According to Hardin, the students often offered more positive perceptions than the adults did. This was especially the case on divisive issues like immigration, which is creating an increasingly diverse population in the county. Whereas students tended to see cultural diversity as an opportunity for them to get to know different cultures and languages, adults tended to view the demographic changes as challenges or barriers.

The success of the student roundtable led to a discussion between Hardin and the superintendent of

schools about finding a way to continue involving Catawba County young people in addressing the future of their community. This resulted in Hardin's visiting all seven high schools in the county in fall 1998. He spoke to the student councils of six of the schools, and to students involved in "service learning," a program that involves them as interns or workers in nonprofit and business organizations. Hardin's presentations engaged student government leaders in envisioning solutions to the issues identified through the telephone survey and the student roundtable. "They see some of the tough choices officials face on public housing and immigration," reports Hardin. "I'm glad they see both sides of the problem. They better understand how difficult these issues are."

Joab Cotton, a Hickory School Board member who participated in one of the adult roundtables, believes it is imperative that government keep the doors open to different ways to solve problems. "What a county commissioner thinks the problem might be is very different from what John Q. Public thinks about it," he explains.



Halifax

[MONTHLY SESSIONS]

Taking a different approach, the Halifax County Board of Commissioners combined eleven of its monthly work sessions with on-the-road sessions in different parts of the county.

Purpose

Like the Buncombe County commissioners, the Halifax County commissioners took their meetings on the road mainly to fulfill a goal they had set for themselves. At a planning retreat in March 1996, the commissioners developed a mission statement and six goals to guide their decision making. One of the goals was to "encourage citizen input and promote awareness of issues to improve decision-making within county government."

Moving the board meetings outside Halifax city was a specific step for "taking county government to the people" and improving citizen input. "Because we are such a large county geographically, we know that it is hard for people in many parts of the county to come to

the county seat," explains Doug Hewett, Halifax County's public information officer. "Not everyone has the transportation or the time to come to Halifax."

Impetus

County government staff proposed the on-the-road work sessions in response to the goal set by the commissioners. County Manager Charles Archer reported that all the commissioners liked the idea and saw advantages to holding their meetings around the county: getting public input, building the board's credibility, and increasing people's confidence in county government. Archer recognized that preparing for and conducting the meetings would increase the workload of commissioners and staff.

Structure of the Meetings

Unlike the Buncombe County commissioners, who operated at a breakneck pace of thirteen weekly meet-

ings, the Halifax County commissioners maintained their regular schedule of two meetings a month: one formal business session and one informal work session. They simply held the 1997 work sessions from 7 to 10 P.M. away from the county seat.

Publicity for the meetings took several forms: flyers sent home with students and distributed at community gathering places, such as churches and stores; public service announcements on the radio; and a mailing to leaders in towns or areas near the meeting place. Attendance ranged from 5 to 250 citizens. According to Archer, the latter number resulted from an unfounded rumor that the commissioners were going to impose strict hunting regulations.

At the work sessions, commissioners explained the citizen-comment period and then introduced brief reports from department heads, two per meeting. The county manager decided which department heads would make reports. Archer said the purpose of the reports was to help educate the commissioners, the staff, and the public about the many services provided by the county. "We featured veteran's services, environmental health, aging programs, and some of the less 'flashy' programs, the ones that normally do not get a lot of attention or exposure," Archer said.

"The department presentations were an educational process not only for the public but also for some of our departments that don't often come in contact with each other," Hewett reported. "This proved to be a great time to promote new initiatives or services of special interest." He cited veteran's services as an example: "That one-person office funnels millions of federal dollars into our community, with an investment of just \$60,000 from the county. Several people were excited to find out about the kind of help they could get."

Outcomes

Offering citizens an opportunity to discuss issues was successful—almost too successful. First, the citizen-input portion of the meetings was set for the first thirty minutes, but in many communities, comments and questions lasted an hour or more. Then, once the commissioners moved on to the rest of their agenda, people wanted to keep asking questions. Although commissioners were pleased to receive the input and to have some give-and-take with their constituents, the extra time given to the effort made conduct of the regular work sessions difficult. "The board really wasn't able to get much work done," Hewett said. Thus in 1998 the board held only four meetings away

from the county seat, one each in February, April, September, and November.

At the February meeting, held in the Hollister community (one of the poorest parts of the county, located in the southwest corner), commissioners and staff reported on the actions taken in response to concerns expressed by citizens at the 1997 meeting there. This meeting drew about thirty-five citizens. Said Hewett, "The manager and the board were able to report on actions taken related to every issue that had been raised by this community just one year ago. While action on some of these issues was already under way before the commissioners heard from the public, the community input definitely added emphasis to certain projects."

The county publicized the first quarterly public meeting in 1998 more than the 1997 sessions because of the new format. Unfortunately that did not produce greater attendance. "Even so," Hewett said, "some key members of the community were there and had very positive things to say about the county. They were vocal and appreciative. At the same time, they identified some new issues for us to focus on, most of which we already knew about."

Commissioners found their "road show" draining but useful. Like the Buncombe County commissioners, they learned that citizens often do not understand what the county government does. For instance, several questions and concerns related to roads or schools, which are not responsibilities of county governments. "You do have to be prepared to do a lot of legwork on noncounty issues," Hewett said. "It would have been more productive to have someone at the meetings from the state department of transportation or the schools." The commissioners' discovery raises larger concerns about how to reach citizens with basic information about the responsibilities of state and local government and the duties of and relationships among school boards, soil and water conservation districts, fire districts, and county boards.

For Halifax County officials, identifying and implementing actions to meet several concerns of their citizens was easy. Such responsiveness heightens a direct connection between citizens turning out for a meeting and actions being taken for their benefit. Of course, city and county governments act all the time on many concerns affecting citizens' well-being. The outcomes of the 1997 work sessions might have been different if citizens had raised concerns that could not be addressed or offered little hope of short-term, visible action.

COMPARISON OF THE OUTREACH EFFORTS

Purpose

Buncombe, Catawba, and Halifax Counties had several common purposes for their outreach efforts. All wanted to get a wider range of citizen input and to hear from new voices. All three boards of county commissioners were interested in making the outreach happen. The level of interest was higher in Buncombe and Halifax Counties, but commissioners in Catawba were supportive too. Finally, officials in all three counties wanted to listen, learn, and be as responsive as possible to residents who attended the sessions.

Some differences in purpose (and method) reflected slightly different goals among the three counties. First, Catawba used a particular model for its effort (that is, Community Countdown 2000), whereas Buncombe created special meetings and Halifax combined its monthly work sessions with special citizen-input periods. Second, only a few commissioners were present at each roundtable in Catawba, whereas the full boards of Halifax and Buncombe attended the community meetings. Third, among the boards the initial level of interest in outreach differed. Halifax's board already had set a specific goal of community outreach. Buncombe's commissioners built on their 1996 campaign commitments and the 1996-97 community visioning effort. Catawba's board had a lower level of interest and initial commitment. However, Catawba created a roundtable solely devoted to hearing from school-age citizens. Halifax and Buncombe did not have a youth focus in their efforts.

Outcomes

The greatest similarity of outcomes was between Buncombe and Halifax Counties. In general, attendance was very good, new voices were heard, and the efforts were very demanding. For practical purposes, though, both counties scaled back in 1998.

In Catawba the results were mixed. Two adult roundtables and the youth forum were successful. However, the other two adult roundtables were poorly attended, and the adult forums in general fell short on the goal of attracting new people. Further, the staff time devoted to planning, organizing, and publicizing the effort was considerable, in view of the results.

In summer and fall 1997, Hardin tried to implement the second phase of the Community Countdown 2000 model: recognizing organizations doing good work on

the priority issues. Despite several publicity efforts, the county received only three nominations, and it gave no awards. "This part of what the National Association of Counties asked us to do fell flat, and I don't know why," says Hardin. He describes the whole process as "a noble idea," but he is uncertain whether he would do it again: "It's a year later, and I'm not sure what's come of it."

Cotton, the Catawba County roundtable participant, thinks local governments should continue seeking citizen input. "We have to find ways to adapt to the questions we are facing," he says, "such as 'What do we do about county population growth?' and 'How do we handle English as a second language in the schools?' Efforts like this give a broader snapshot of what people are thinking."

GUIDELINES

The following guidelines for public participation are drawn from the recommendations and ideas of local government officials in the three counties and from our analysis.

In the Early Stages

1. *Assess your readiness.* How do your board members interact with the public and one another? Many of those involved in Buncombe and Halifax Counties' efforts credited the success of the meetings to good relationships among board members. Even when they disagree, commissioners tend to be respectful of one another and do not make a habit of grandstanding on personal or political issues. Cities and counties with more contentious boards should be cautious about having special citizen-input sessions or use a neutral, skilled facilitator to moderate them.

2. *Watch your timing.* In scheduling public forums, be sensitive to election time lines and other events and issues that could undermine a fair and open exchange. The Buncombe County commissioners agreed that timing was a very important factor. "We did not want to have the meetings right before elections, so we began planning them soon after the last election," said Commissioner Bill Stanley. Counties and cities with elections every two years should be especially sensitive about when to host their first citizen-input meetings.

3. *Keep your hopes high but your expectations modest.* The only outcome you can predict is unpredictability. Without apparent reasons, some participation efforts

may yield success, and others may not. Be prepared for either a handful of folks or a standing-room-only crowd. Similarly, be ready for spirited and substantive discussion at one meeting and blank stares at another.

4. *Spread the word.* Use both free and paid advertising in the news media (the most successful efforts have done so). Also, use prominent, well-lit signs for announcements at meeting sites in communities. If you want the participation of a broad group or must ensure representation of specific stakeholders, extend personal invitations to appropriate individuals or groups. Try to enlist the participation of people who have not been extensively involved before.

5. *Do your homework.* Try to anticipate the key issues. However, realize that you likely will not identify all of them, so make any topic fair game. Buncombe County's Greene found it helpful to ask employees from the town or the area where the meeting would be held to identify issues that seemed to interest their neighbors. Catawba County found it more effective to identify specific topics for discussion so that citizens would know what the focus would be. Either way, be sure to have the appropriate materials and staff on hand to deal with the issues identified.

6. *Choose an effective moderator and establish ground rules.* In both Buncombe and Halifax Counties, the board's chair had the skills to draw people out yet not let any one speaker or group dominate. Be sure that the chair has these abilities, or find someone who does. Determine whether you need a moderator or a facilitator; the two roles require different skills.

At the Meeting Site

7. *Take advantage of the chance to educate.* Arrange for brief reports by department heads to raise citizens' awareness of services and help department heads learn more about one another's work. Bring along large, detailed maps to locate sites. "We brought large maps to show the water system expansions, but we ended up using them to locate other places in the county," said Halifax County's Hewett. Buncombe County officials distributed pocket-sized reference cards listing key departments, their locations, and their telephone numbers, and contacts for frequently requested noncounty services, such as school administrators, regional officials of the North Carolina Department of Transportation, and personnel responsible for municipal street repair.

8. *Have participants sign in.* Collect names, addresses, and telephone numbers. Consider asking a couple

of short questions on a specific issue. Provide postcards for people to write in questions or comments—an especially good approach with those who are not comfortable speaking in public. Collect the postcards at the end of the event, or self-address them to be mailed in.

9. *Use neutral observers.* Ask representatives of various groups (for example, stakeholders' committees) to monitor the meetings and provide feedback on what seemed to work well, what needed improvement, and what participants were saying.

10. *Offer other options for involvement.* Provide information on how citizens can participate further on issues important to them, such as volunteering for committees or task forces. Catawba County's Hibbitts explains, "People don't understand the mechanisms of getting involved and are sometimes intimidated. Once they are in, they are enthusiastic participants."

After the Meeting

11. *Identify ample resources.* Make sure you have sufficient staff assigned to follow up with requests for information, reports on problems, and so on. Both Buncombe and Halifax County officials realized the importance of following up on commitments made at the meetings. Halifax County officials recognized that the follow-up activities would affect the daily duties of their small staff. Even so, they decided that staff should write personal letters within five days of the meetings to any participants who had specific concerns or questions.

12. *Don't make hasty commitments.* Think carefully about the repercussions before making commitments that might involve legal issues or funding. Buncombe County's Connolly observes, "You run the risk of looking like the meetings are just for show. At the same time, you don't want the board to make commitments without thinking through the consequences." Follow-up correspondence with citizens should clearly indicate the status of board commitments.

13. *Develop an action matrix.* Develop a matrix of issues or questions that require follow-up. Use it to track progress or lack of progress in addressing issues.

CONCERNS

In considering special citizen-input efforts, boards would be wise to examine two concerns. First, will the efforts raise expectations to an unreasonable level?

Second, how can you do something special without diminishing all the regular ways for citizens to obtain information and express their views?

Heightened Expectations

Public officials may fear that if they cannot satisfy some specific demands of citizens, citizens will become frustrated, angry, or disillusioned. This is a legitimate concern but should not stop public officials from trying. If people think that they are taken seriously and if they receive timely feedback from government officials, their respect for and trust in local government are likely to improve, even if they are disappointed with a particular outcome.

Special versus Regular Efforts

The second concern really is a continuing challenge for all government entities that regularly seek citizens' views but are not satisfied with the range of people participating. Special efforts, like the ones described in this article, have the benefit of greater publicity and shorter, intense commitment by county staff and elected officials. They can demonstrate a strong dedication to making government officials accessible and responsive.

On the other hand, designing and running special sessions so that they are seen as genuine and beneficial is a challenge. Care in the timing and the location of such sessions is needed. For example, if a session occurs during the election season, citizens might interpret the higher level of publicity as an effort by board incumbents to boost their reelection chances. Or if there is a hot issue in the community, a special citizen-input session might become very adversarial and overlook people's concerns on many other topics. Finally, anything deemed special can be criticized as an exception to the rule that citizens should have regular opportunities, in convenient locations, to share their views and obtain the information they need. "If citizen input is so valuable, why does it take a special effort by the board?" a skeptic might ask.

An alternative to organizing special sessions is to have routine ways of informing citizens and seeking

their views. Such an approach could respond to suspicions that the board is more interested in bolstering its image than in having citizens' views shape its actions.

Yet without heightened publicity and other extraordinary effort, citizens may not find a session *special enough* to attend. Further, the media may not find the session sufficiently newsworthy to publicize in advance or report afterward. Thus two essential elements of effective outreach—adequate notice and efforts to build interest, and actual participation from citizens—are diminished.

CONCLUSION

The experience of the boards of county commissioners in Buncombe, Catawba, and Halifax Counties shows several of the advantages and the disadvantages of trying special ways to hear from citizens on issues that county government can influence. Because of the high levels of citizen distrust and alienation from government in general, many local government officials in North Carolina are seeking effective ways to learn about citizens' concerns and respond to them. Although setting up special meetings for citizen input is not an exact science, we hope that the guidelines in this article will help school, city, and county officials obtain productive feedback on important policy matters.

NOTES

1. The Institute of Government, in cooperation with the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners and the North Carolina League of Municipalities, operates NCINFO, a Web site with an array of valuable information about state and local government in North Carolina. NCINFO can be reached at <http://ncinfo.iog.unc.edu>.

2. The Vision Steering Committee [161 people]. *The Asheville/Buncombe Vision* (Asheville, N.C.: Nov. 17, 1995), 10.

3. Letters to the Editor, *Asheville Times-Citizen*, Nov. 27, 1997, p. 10.

4. *Community Countdown 2000 Campaign Kit* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Counties, 1996). Other North Carolina counties using Community Countdown 2000 materials in 1997 included Alamance, Jackson, and Moore.