

Public Outreach Techniques¹

Friends of Midcoast Maine

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A public participation strategy to accompany an update of a municipal comprehensive plan is among the most challenging, given the length of the planning process and the comprehensiveness of topics involved in preparing the update. Nevertheless, most communities' efforts rarely go beyond appointing a citizen's advisory group, posting notices of meetings, conducting a townwide survey, and holding a public hearing toward the end of the process. Some communities hold several public workshops, which are often poorly attended. Then after years of work by dedicated and often dwindling number of advisory committee members, the community is surprised by either the level of contentiousness or lack of interest in the plan, and cynically wonder whether trying to get people to participate is worth the effort.

The following table suggests a different way to engage the public in updating a comprehensive plan. It proposes only three community wide meetings (not including the required public hearing) and no town-wide survey, but includes a variety of other techniques aimed at soliciting views and engaging the public.

Many of the techniques described in this strategy are applicable to other planning efforts, such as community facility siting, school consolidation discussions, and adoption of open space plans. The number of and specific techniques may vary, but the need to engage the community from the beginning to the end of the process and to offer a mix of techniques to involve the different types of people who make up the community is necessary to ensure good participation in the effort.

Outreach Component	Description of Activities	Timing
Internet Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Create a planning page on the town's website and advertise its availability. ◆ Post general information on planning, committee composition and role, and the anticipated update process in the form of FAQ (frequently asked questions), as well as a listing of useful weblinks. ◆ Announce all plan-related activities. ◆ Post slideshows focusing on evaluation of existing plan, major issues facing the town, and preliminary plan findings. ◆ Post vision statement and draft plan sections as they become available. ◆ Provide email address for comments/suggestions. 	Ongoing
Public Opinion Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Forgo comprehensive town-wide survey for short, focused surveys on a few key topics, handed out and collected at neighborhood forums and provocative quick-response survey questions posted on the town's website. 	Ongoing
Computer Slideshow Presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Create slideshows using digital photos, charts, and maps that can be presented at scheduled forums and workshops, "taken on the road" by committee members, or loaned out by local organizations, and posted on the town's website.³ 	Ongoing

¹ Largely taken from Updating Your Comprehensive Plan: 50 Recommendations for Making Plan Updates More Effective. Maine State Planning Office, 2003.

³ You may want to create several different slideshow variations depending on your audience, the stage you are at, and other factors. Computer slideshows can be easily modified. At a minimum, you should consider creating at least two presentations: one to provide background and initial findings at the front-end of your process; and the other to highlight major components of the plan as it evolves.

Visioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Session #1: Set an overall vision for the town. ◆ Session #2: Preliminary discussion of growth and rural areas. ◆ Post vision statement on town's website and in newsletters and local papers. 	Partway through the process
Town-wide Tour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Schedule a tour, focusing on areas most treasured by citizens and most vulnerable to change, e.g., waterfronts, villages, suburbanizing rural lands. Use school buses or a convoy of vans, depending on level of interest. ◆ Take video footage of the tour that can be shown at public forums. 	Between first and second visioning session
Neighborhood Forums (to be held in different neighborhoods)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Present slideshow evaluating existing situation, recent growth trends, buildout analysis, and preliminary findings, including focus on specific neighborhoods. ◆ Present and discuss vision statement. ◆ Solicit views on issues, implications of recent and future growth trends, and growth and rural areas. (Use written questionnaires and general discussion.) 	After visioning sessions and formulation of preliminary growth and rural areas
Town-wide Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Meeting# 1: Present findings relating to growth and development and preliminary growth and rural areas. Solicit views. 	After neighborhood forums
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Meeting #2: Present draft policies and strategies, including revised growth and rural areas. Explain rationale behind approaches. Solicit views. 	After meeting #2
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Meeting #3: Present revised draft plan. Solicit views. 	After meeting #3
Town Newsletter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Include a regular column on planning news and events in bi-monthly newsletter. 	Ongoing
Coordination with News Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Announce all upcoming events in local newspapers and town newsletter. ◆ Contact media about publicizing major planning events and one or more inserts summarizing elements of the plan. ◆ Encourage letters to the editor about elements of the plan and/or planning process. 	Ongoing
Local Cable TV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Tape and broadcast visioning sessions and town-wide forums. ◆ Tape neighborhood sessions for broadcast later. ◆ Tape and broadcast weekly or periodic programs devoted to plan-related issues and events. 	Ongoing
School Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Involve students in visioning or other planning processes, either in separate sessions or as a segment of town-wide session. ◆ Integrate planning into curriculum. ◆ Distribute fliers about upcoming events or availability of information on the town's website for school children to take home to parents. 	Ongoing
Public Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Informal afternoon workshop for questions and answers. ◆ Formal evening public hearing to receive testimony. 	After town-wide meeting #4
Town-wide Mailing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Send out goals, policies, and strategies section as insert in bi-monthly newsletters. Include summary of changes made (or not made) based on public input and why. 	After public hearing
Town Meeting or Council Vote	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Have response team ready to address last minute question. Have final FAQ ready for voters. 	At town meeting