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Cooperative Achievement
Elected Officials and Advisory Boards Work Together to Strengthen Their Cities
by Marilyn Crotty

One of the most common forms of citizen participation is the use of advisory boards. Every local g routinely appoints citizens to serve on these boards – sometimes without fully understanding the v benefits that can be attained, and the pitfalls that should be avoided.

Why bother with advisory boards? They take time, cost money, and can at times make the work of more difficult. On the other hand, advisory boards fill an important role in most communities:
- They allow for an in-depth examination of issues.
- They serve as a communication channel between elected officials and the community.
- They bring a broad range of ideas and expertise to public decision making.
- They assist in resolving conflicts.
- The provide training for new leaders.

Before determining if the establishment of an advisory board will be beneficial, careful thought sho given to the purpose of the board. Of course, there are statutory provisions, both federal and state, require the use of advisory boards. However, in many instances, a city has wide discretion in the u boards.

Do you need to determine the popularity of an issue? Are you looking for substantive content input matter? Will an impartial, open-minded group be able to deal with a controversial or sensitive issue about building a constituency for an issue? Or is there a need for a "watchdog" group to oversee s Would there be value in establishing a committee of critics or a committee of advocates? Each of t questions should be explored as you determine the need for the advisory board. You must be clea purpose of the board before you create it. If there are things you do not want an advisory board to out in the ordinance establishing the board. Set a timeframe for committees that are convened for purpose. There is nothing like a deadline to keep a group focused on its task.

The next step in assuring the success of an advisory board is appointing the right people to serve Balanced committees that broadly represent your community will assure that a variety of viewpoint heard. If you have difficulty identifying people in your community who are willing to serve on advisory you might want to set up a "board bank." This registry of applications from citizens interested in ser advisory committees should be promoted in every medium the city uses to communicate with its re Some jurisdictions actually establish a citizen committee to make recommendations to the elected nominees to serve on boards. It is helpful to develop job descriptions for members of boards so ap and appointees fully understand their roles and responsibilities prior to accepting appointment.

Local governments should assign appropriate staff to assist in and support the work of advisory bo aggressive board can overtake a weak staff, while too strong a staff can overpower the members c citizen committee. Staff and boards that achieve a balanced approach to their work tend to be mos Sometimes it is appropriate to use an outside facilitator to assist a committee in its work. This is es important when the issue is controversial or sensitive, and the city must avoid any appearance of t control.

It is critical that members of advisory boards are given orientations and training in the specifics of t This should include information on "sunshine laws," roles and responsibilities, parliamentary proce content-related topics. Encourage your boards to continue their education by sending them to app

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conferences or workshops that keep them up to date on changes in the law or alternative approacl dealing with the issues.

A mechanism for ongoing, two-way communication between an advisory board and the elected bo be established. At a minimum, annually schedule each advisory board on the agenda for a report c its activities. Of most importance is that elected officials listen to the advice of its citizen boards. Of you may not always follow this advice, but if you constantly ignore it, you will probably face frequer on your boards and skepticism in your community.

Once boards are established and members appointed, elected bodies have an obligation to period evaluate their performance. Are they functioning effectively? Are there things that could be change increase board effectiveness? Is the board still necessary? You can use a variety of methods to ev boards. Ask the boards to complete an annual self-evaluation, and report their findings to the coun may engage an outside, independent evaluator to review the work of your boards. Or, staff and the body may conduct regular evaluations of their advisory boards. These reviews should assess the v advisory board as a whole, and also look at the participation of individual members.

And finally, local officials must give meaningful recognition to their advisory boards. Many cities ho appreciation events for their advisory boards and/or highlight them in newsletters and on Web site: creative in finding opportunities to give sincere thanks to your board members. Whatever methods make sure they are frequent, public, and acknowledge the hard work of your volunteer citizens.

Advisory boards that serve a real purpose, consist of the right people, and are appropriately staffe evaluated and recognized, can be a terrific asset to every community.

Advisory Committee Dos and Don'ts
DO:
1. Clearly define your charge to the committee. (Many committees flounder and fail because of the clear charge or any specific charge at all.)

2. Give a specific time limit for single-purpose committees and discourage extensions.

3. Select the best possible members for your committees, considering factors such as sex, race, g expertise, and any others you deem important for proper balance.

4. Provide staff support if at all possible. In smaller communities and counties, citizen advisory grou sometimes have been successful without assigned staff support, but that pattern seems to be incre rare.

5. Define the relationship to the staff. Involve your manager in deciding how to structure the adviso committee, assign its work and staff it. Ask his or her recommendations on what to do about the cc advice.

6. Provide orientation and training for new committee members. Unless they're already specialists, need help in understanding their assigned subject area, and also will need to understand the relati the assigned field to the governmental agency as a whole.

7. Develop a work program for the committee for the term of its work, or have the committee prepa its use and yours.

8. Evaluate the work of the committee (or the committee can do this).

9. Maintain good communications with all of your advisory committees. As part of this effort, each (should send regular reports of its activities to the legislative body. Periodic meetings between the l and the individual committees also can be quite helpful.

10. Abolish and thank committees when their work is done.

DON'T:

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1. Neglect your advisory committees.

2. Ignore their advice on a regular basis, or good people will decline to serve on the committees.

3. Let the advisory committee capture the staff. In some jurisdictions, by default or evolution, the a boards dominate the staffs, thus removing them from the effective control of the central executive (that person is elected or appointed).

4. Go overboard in appointing large numbers of committees in the name of responsiveness and cit participation. Some jurisdictions have established committees on practically every governmental to could imagine. The usual result is conflict between committees with overlapping jurisdictions, a lac give adequate support to the committees, and a tendency for the legislative body to ignore much o of the committees since it is simply overwhelmed with the volume of reports coming in.

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Facilitation: A Key for Successful Advisory Boards and Committees
by Dr. Tom Taylor

Boards and committees are formed to perform a task or solve a problem and then are expected to do their work. Unfortunately, like most groups, many meet and continue to meet with limited results missing ingredient often is "good facilitation." The goal of facilitation is to produce practical, fair pro all can be proud of. This article offers suggestions for achieving the facilitation objectives, talks abc can facilitate and offers ideas for improving facilitation of your boards and committees.

Suggestions for Achieving Facilitation Objectives

Committee Purpose and Plan
The first step is shaping a mission that everyone can identify with. Often, elected officials or admin give the committee a charge (and sometimes they don't). The key is to hear from all members abo expectations and those of the groups they represent. Identifying which expectations are common a conflict also is helpful. This provides a basis for shaping a work plan and a schedule for addressing priority issues. Too often, groups have one meeting after another with little understanding of the st needed to get their job done. Similarly, agendas for each meeting need to be more than a long list Meeting plans should also include facilitation techniques, background materials and worksheets.

Mutual Education
Many times, the chair or staff plan presentations based on their professional disciplines: law, busin science, etc. Long, boring, irrelevant presentations discourage continuing participation. It is helpful consensus on the priority questions to be answered, the information needed to answer the questio who to bring in as experts. This will greatly improve the quality of the presentation and the attentior receives. It also is important to remember that everyone has a piece of the truth and that no one ha truth. Committee members and others need to be able to ask questions and share insights. Differe perspectives, expert and stakeholder, are critical for arriving at practical, creative solutions.

Creative Problem Solving
Adversarial sessions get the adrenaline going, which shifts the mental functioning from the rational reptilian "fight or flight" mode. A key role of facilitation is to engage the group in exploring possibiliti of arguing for their positions. Structured exercises and questions can quickly have an angry group lists, laughing and surprising themselves with what they can come up with.

Consensus Decision Making
Majority voting at its best is simple and efficient. At worst, it makes half the group "losers" who war back at the "winners" and who may not to want to come back to a group that does not care about tl concerns. Reaching consensus may take a little longer, but the dividends, including better results, commitment to implementation and improved relationships, are great. Consensus does not mean t everyone loves the outcome. It means that, at a minimum, they feel they have been heard and, the not block actions desired by the group. In some cases, nobody is too happy, because everyone ha give a lot to get an acceptable agreement. Ranking the acceptability of options on a scale of 1 to 5 allows the group to focus discussions on items on which agreement is possible. This avoids wastin talking about issues on which there already is agreement, or on those on which agreement is very

Conflict Resolution

We all have seen groups that spend endless hours arguing, or ones that avoid critical issues becal
are controversial. Conflicts require different facilitation techniques from problem solving or consens
seeking. Like a mediator, the facilitator helps the parties understand each other's needs and helps
agreements that optimize their priority interests. If members still are not able to resolve differences
agree on next steps that may include getting an expert opinion, or asking the commission or an ad
to make the decision. It is best to include these procedures in the instructions to the board or comr

Action Planning

All talk and no action leaves everyone frustrated. Every recommendation should specify who is res
set deadlines and discuss sources of resources. Without these practical necessities, people may b
with the pleasing platitudes, but implementation will be uncertain at best. If no answers are agreed
group needs to specify tasks and responsibilities for gathering information, problem solving and ge
commitments.

Trust and Commitment Building

Good facilitation allows people to express their deepest desires and uncertainties and feel accepte
people see each other as whole beings, rather than villains and victims, trust builds. Allowing peop
their stories, sort out commonalities and differences, and seek mutually acceptable solutions, build
relationships and commitment to implementation. This level of commitment is stronger than what c
voting by adversaries.

Facilitation Roles

Good facilitation is a combination of art and science, learned skills and intuition. In most cases, the
responsibility for facilitation falls to the chair or president. Sometimes there is a staff member or ou
facilitator. Having a neutral facilitator can pay big dividends. Often, it means the group can get muc
done in less time, and it allows the chair to contribute to the discussion. Everyone in the group alsc
contribute to a well-facilitated meeting. Anyone who understands good group process and facilitati
techniques can ask the right questions and offer process suggestions that build shared understanc
problems and help reach consensus.

Building Facilitation Capacity

Facilitation skills are something we use every day, but most of us never get any instruction. The pr
of local government boards and committees could be doubled if chairs and staff could get facilitatic
and support. Educational materials also can be provided. Some governments have a cadre of train
facilitators who are assigned to committees or special meetings as needed. Committee charges, cl
protocols can be written to encourage problem solving and consensus processes. Meeting and cor
progress evaluations help achieve continuous improvement.

Conclusion

Advisory boards or committee chairs and members need to be informed advocates and to contribu
group's productivity. It is a challenge to do both. Facilitation training and written guidelines are imp
When possible, it pays to have a neutral facilitator. Efforts to assure good facilitation usually are re
times over in better-quality products, less time spent by members and staff, stronger commitment 1
implementation, and improved relationships.

*Dr. Tom Taylor, is associate director of the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium. He may be con
phone at (850) 644-7816 or via e-mail at ttaylor@fsu.edu.*

When are Advisory Boards and Committees Appropriate?

When To Use Them
- The issue needs more study than is feasible in commission meetings.
- There is not obvious solution, and creativity is called for.
- There are conflicting groups and interests; complex negotiation is needed.
- Commitment from different groups is needed for implementation.
- There is adequate technical and logistical support available.

When Not To Use Them

- The purpose is to distract activists and keep them out or commissioners' hair.
- The decision already has been made.
- Critical interests are not invited or willing to participate.
- There is not a clear charge or scope of work from the commission.
- There is not adequate time to do a good job.
- There is not adequate technical and logistical support.
- There are not resources to implement the recommendations.
- The task would be better done by experts.

Types of Committees and Other Involvement Options

- Permanent committee
- Temporary or ad-hoc committee
- Facilitated workshop or series of workshops
- Charrette (a one- or two-day design or problem-solving session)
- Mediation between groups in conflict
- Contract with a consultant/expert
- Public meeting
- Focus groups
- Request for written comments on draft recommendations
- Public survey

Your Action Plan for Enhancing the Success of Citizen Advis Boards and Committees

Check all that will enhance your effectiveness:

Review current committees' structure and performance.

___ Compile a database on membership, terms, meeting times and place, appointment method, pi progress and products.

___ Conduct a satisfaction survey of committee chairs, members and staff.

Create or refine a policy for committees and boards.

___ Assign to staff.

___ Hire a consultant.

___ Create a committee.

Provide appropriate training for the following:

___ Commissioners on creating, picking, giving a charge to and managing committees.

___ Chairs and members on subject area knowledge.

___ Chairs, staff and facilitators on process planning and facilitation.

Establish a mechanism for supporting and monitoring committees.

___ Designate committee-commission liaisons.

___ Create a cadre of trained facilitators.

___ Require quarterly or annual reports for appropriate committees.

___ Identify a person or office to be responsible for monitoring and supporting committees.

Further Readings

- *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, Sam Kaner, et al., (Gabriola Island, BC: Ne Publishers/Canada, 1996). Provides clear guidance for thinking about group dynamics and the ope discussion and structured facilitation techniques needed to enable (not control) group productivity.

- *Managing Public Disputes*, Susan L. Carpenter & W.J.D. Kennedy (San Francisco: Jossey Bas: This is an excellent guide for anyone involved in large-scale community disputes.

- *How To Make Meetings Work*, Michael Doyle and David Straus, (New York: Jove, 1976). This i:

practical guide for mediators and facilitators. It provides a general approach for group processes a
descriptions of specific techniques.

- *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems*, Gray, Barbara, Jossey-Bass,

- *Great Meetings! How To Facilitate Like a Pro*, Kelsey, et al., Hanson Park Press, 1999.

- *The Skilled Facilitator*, Schwarz, Roger, University of North Carolina, 1994.

- *Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes*, Susskind and Cr
Basic Books, 1987.

Web Sites

Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium

The Planning Commissioners Journal

Montgomery County (Md.) Committee Materials

Calackamas County (Ore.) Committee Handbook

Longboat Key (Fla.) Committee Materials

Washington State Board Roles

Most Complete Source on Conflict Resolution

Group Facilitation Discussion Group

International Association for Public Participation

Association for Conflict Resolution
(see "Environmental Public Policy" section)

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How To Succeed with Advisory Boards
An Interview with Steve Meisburg
by Mandy Rogers

Municipal advisory boards are made up of dedicated citizens who devote time, energy and experti: issues or causes that affect their city.

However, advisory boards without a clear mission or purpose not only are ineffective, but waste th board members, elected officials and city employees.

Former Tallahassee City Commissioner Steve Meisburg has firsthand knowledge of what makes a boards work. In 1999, he helped create Tallahassee's Community Neighborhood Renaissance Pai

The partnership's mission is to rebuild the community's most distressed inner-city neighborhoods, address both the physical and social needs of neighborhoods by using a holistic approach.

Apalachee Ridge Estates, an at-risk south-side Tallahassee neighborhood, has been the first to re benefits of the partnership. One of the cornerstones of the neighborhood's revitalization is the Tecl and Learning Resource Center, which has opened a new world to many residents who do not own or have Internet access. (For more information on this partnership, see the May/June 2003 issue o Cities.)

The next Renaissance community, Providence, has a series of problems, such as crime and pove be addressed as part of its revitalization.

Meisburg, the chairman of the Partnership Board, said advisory boards are important to cities or pr often are overlooked or don't receive the attention they deserve.

Meisburg commented, "These boards are invaluable." He stressed that he is concerned when he k an elected or appointed official is unaware of a particular board or its work.

Meisburg said there are several factors that made his advisory board successful, and that can be t help new and existing boards.

Communication
The most important factor that keeps an advisory board running smoothly is regular communicatiol everybody involved with the board – members, city staff and elected officials.

As chairman of the Partnership Board, Meisburg worked with numerous organizations that offered and expertise to the effort. Included in the partnership are organizations such as Florida State Uni\ (FSU), Florida A&M University, Tallahassee Community College, Arvida Corporation, the City of Tɛ the Leon County Board of County Commissioners, the Leon County School Board, AmSouth Bank America, Capital City Bank, the United Way of the Big Bend, the Apalachee Ridge Estates Neighb Association and Covenant Partners.

Forming the partnership took almost a year, but Meisburg said the most effective way to reach so i people, and to get them excited about a cause, is through direct and personal contact.

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"For the Renaissance Partnership, I knew we could benefit from FSU's vast resources, so I called · university's president and met with the council of deans to let them know what the partnership is al Meisburg said. "If cities can build advisory boards around the same philosophy, they will be succes

Meisburg said one of the worst scenarios is when advisory boards work for months – or even year: recommendations that never get to the city commission, or are totally rejected.

"The outcome is a bunch of frustrated people who gave a lot of time and energy, and their voices v heard," Meisburg said.

He said that if advisory boards have regular communication in some form with the elected body, it likely that they will learn sooner rather than later if they are going in a direction that cannot be supp

"At such time, they will have clear choices: continue in the same direction, alter the course, change membership, or disband," Meisburg said.

Clearly Defined Roles

Not all board members are appointed at the same time. Meisburg said it's important to help orient i members, and to make sure each knows what is expected. Also, occasionally making sure existinc know what they are supposed to be doing can be beneficial.

"Every board should have some type of bylaws that defines what people's roles and responsibilitie: Meisburg said. "When people come on board, they need to know what to do and what not to do, ar person is wandering astray, somebody needs to let them know."

Each committee has a chairperson who leads the group. The person should be well informed, ade| leadership skills, tactful and organized, Meisburg said. "Leadership is critical."

Clearly Defined Goals

It is important to have long-range goals that are assessed on a regular basis. "If your goals are cle: defined, it gives both the board and the government a sense of what the board is and where it's go Meisburg said.

Having a clear mission and attainable goals also gives the board members a sense of importance. mission allows the members to know there is an important reason for being on that board," Meisbu "This also gets members fired up and lets them know what they're doing has a purpose."

Elected Official Participation

It is important for elected officials to be involved somehow in the work of advisory boards. Howevei officials cannot sit on boards, and should not try individually to steer boards in a certain direction.

"It is meaningful to board members when elected officials make appearances at meetings and ackı their effort," Meisburg said.

He said elected officials with an interest in the topic being addressed by a particular advisory boarc naturally align themselves with that board. The participation of elected officials not only helps advis stay on the right path, but also makes board members feel as if their work has meaning.

"Recognition is key – somehow the city and the elected officials need to convey appreciation to bo: members for the work," Meisburg said. "Let people know they're important and that their faithfulnes city and government is a great service."

A Sense of Purpose

Hot-button advisory boards usually are in the spotlight more than boards that have an ongoing mis important for all advisory boards to have a sense of importance.

"Although an advisory board's topic may never be controversial, it works just as hard as boards wh issues that are in the spotlight," Meisburg said. "No matter what the issue, the board needs to give commission a reason to get its arms around the problem."

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Meisburg recommends appointing a knowledgeable spokesperson for the board who can convey tl goals, mission and, eventually, its recommendations for the city.

Summing It Up
Based on the success of the Partnership Board, Meisburg's methodology worked, and his suggest be applied to any city advisory board or committee.

"All these things made this project successful," Meisburg said. "Most importantly, I made sure ever board member always knew what was going on and made sure each person was included in the p drew on those people for advocacy and resources and gave them credit."

Mandy Rogers is a publications specialist with the Florida League of Cities.
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