

## **Business Education**

### **The Focus Group Process in Community Planning**

Craig W. Kelsey

Dean, Extended University Division

Professor of Public Policy and Administration, CSUB

Capturing public input is a helpful and critical element of proper community and business planning. The public can provide vital, direct and meaningful input that allows the professional to consider future decision making actions with greater security and accuracy. Public involvement techniques can help define user wants, desires, needs, priorities, and participation and satisfaction levels. Any or all of this type of data is informative for planning purposes. If the assessment device is constructed as such, vital geographic and demographic information can be obtained. When superimposed over other information, such as new community initiatives, very specific management decisions can be made. Good management strategy and policy development is based on accurate and current public input, and those policies that clearly reflect the needs of citizens coupled with agency or business resources are most likely to have meaning. Most planning studies use citizen involvement as a critical element in designing for the future.

After all, the planning should mirror the community context for which the plan is designed. Public involvement can come through a variety of different methods (telephone calls, mail-out surveys, on-site questionnaires, door-to-door interviews, public hearings, etc.) each with its particular set of strengths and concerns. Re-emerging as a popular approach is the “public focus group” method. This process consists of asking highly-committed and well-informed citizens to spend an evening discussing, debating and then prioritizing pre-determined community issues that are deemed critical by the professional staff.

These issues might be generated by the professional staff as would questions used for the other survey and questionnaire methods or in conjunction with a citizen/business advisory committee or technical assistance team. Each issue is placed on a 8 ½ x 11 index card and as the citizens discuss, with the help of a trained facilitator, the various merits of importance of each issue the cards are continually readjusted on a table or bulletin board in a line-of-priority order until the citizens are satisfied that the issues are in the most appropriate priority order. This process allows large groups of citizens to focus on highly complex issues in a short period of time under a controlled environment with a high degree of citizen involvement and commitment.

The public focus group is an excellent blend between the traditional public hearing and the common survey approach to collecting citizen input. The public hearing allows citizens to express views in an open forum which provides important perspectives for planners to hear. However, at times public hearings get derailed on issues brought up by the strongest and loudest voices in the meeting and it is very possible that the information brought forward is so varied and individual that it can not be tabulated and no clear trends emerge. The survey is used to control the specific information that the planners need (by asking very specific questions on the survey form) and hence tabulation and trends, if any, clearly emerge. In fact, if demographic and geographic information is asked, then the trend can become very neighborhood or citizen specific. However, the survey is usually filled out by citizens in isolation (in their home with little or no interaction with others) and the very important hearing and sharing of divergent views is missed.

The public focus group brings together both needed elements: control by dealing with pre-determined issues (the same as the survey questions) and active dialogue by encouraging citizens to discuss and debate those issues from their unique vantage points. Previous research has illustrated the successful use of the focus group method in which a wide array of issues and groups has been studied. Specifically such concepts as; market research, nutrition, nursing, community colleges, TV commercials, supermarkets, pharmacy education, employee relations, public relations, high-risk families and libraries have found the focus group process helpful.

This method has its own set of strengths and concerns but depending on the circumstances of the community, the citizens, local issues, time frames and such it can be a viable mechanism for helpful public input. Public focus groups generally are inexpensive (usually the cost of a public meeting space and a trained facilitator). Allow for a high level of control of public input, that is, the citizens are focused on the pre-determined issues not personal or hidden agendas that sometimes emerge during public hearing styled meetings. They also elicit usable, detailed and comparable information such as the relative importance of one community issue over another. Additionally, these types of meetings help to inform citizens of issues, share information that might make for a better informed citizenry and can help to identify new issues of concern not previously known by the professional staff.

Experience has also shown that people involved in focus groups feel better about citizen involvement, more committed to the decision made and become active voices for the implementation of the decision making process. However, public focus groups can not entertain all issues of concern, and so some citizens might feel frustrated if an item of specific concern to them was not dealt with. Related to this might be a citizen who attempts to introduce a new issue that the citizen feels is of equal or greater importance than the predetermined issues brought before the group. Also, by the very nature of the citizen discussion, debate and prioritization process of the meetings some citizens dominate the conversation, attempt to overly influence others in the group and might even frustrate the purpose of the focus group. It should be recognized that not all community issues important to citizens can be included in the focus groups, and so opportunities need to exist after the meetings for citizens to discuss with professional staff these additional and different issues. One of the key components to making the process work is an experienced facilitator who can control the direction of the meeting and handle unrelated interests.

Public focus groups are an effective means of obtaining public input that is generally inexpensive, relatively rapid and engenders high citizen involvement and usually solid citizen commitment. Of course, it is not appropriate in all communities or for all circumstances, but its use has increased in popularity primarily due to its effectiveness as a planning tool.