

"Federation Corner" column
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Pushing public involvement in government

by Jim Humphrey
member, MCCF Executive Committee

I have heard members of both the Montgomery County Council and our Planning Board state that they wish a larger, more diverse segment of the public weighed in on issues under consideration, instead of the small number of devoted civic activists they regularly see. Officials in the city of Portland, Oregon apparently felt the same way. And they did something about it. They enacted a set of Public Involvement Principles on August 4, 2010, and hired a Public Involvement Best Practices Coordinator to oversee their implementation.

The Principles, created over a 14 month period, "will allow for a higher quality and more consistent level of public outreach," according to Portland Mayor Sam Adams. The City Council also adopted an initiative to create a public involvement report that will be submitted each time a measure is considered at City Council. In addition, the Council agreed to conduct a baseline assessment of public involvement across City bureaus.

As stated in their Preamble, these seven Principles represent a road map to guide officials and staff in establishing consistent, effective and high quality public involvement across Portland's city government. They are intended to set out what the public can expect from city government, while retaining flexibility in the way city bureaus carry out their work.

The following is a list of Portland's Public Involvement Principles, along with a set of indicators for each showing characteristics exhibited by governmental processes which follow that principle.

Partnership. Community members are kept informed of issues and processes. They know how to be involved and decide their degree of involvement. They are advised how their input will affect the decision, and are followed up by contact from the lead agency throughout the decision-making process. Process constraints are clarified and understood by community members. The decision making process and decision makers and their power are explained and understood.

Early involvement. Community members help set priorities and shape policies, programs, and projects. Key stakeholders are involved as early as possible, and help define the problem, issues and project parameters. Community members help define the process for outreach and decision making.

Building relationships and community capacity. Community members feel heard and feel that their input is valued and used by City staff. And they trust the process and City staff. City staff members have consistent and reliable connections with stakeholders and community groups that facilitate effective two-way communications. And staff members continually assess which communities and populations are missing key information, or are not involved.

Inclusiveness and equity. A strong effort is made to accommodate diverse needs, backgrounds, values and challenges. Participation in the process reflects the diversity of the community affected by the outcome. Culturally appropriate and effective strategies and techniques are used to involve diverse constituencies. City staff follow-up with under-engaged groups to see how the process worked for their community members. An assessment is made to identify communities impacted by a project or policy; and active participation of these communities is made a high priority. The demographics, values, and desires of and impacts on affected communities are identified early on, influence the process design, and are reaffirmed throughout the process.

Good quality process design and implementation. The public is allowed an opportunity to give meaningful input regarding what the community needs from government. Process facilitators have the skills, experience, and resources needed to be effective. Careful planning of project timelines take into account the length of time community media, neighborhoods and organizations require for effective public involvement. Information is sent out in a timely manner so people and organizations can respond. Input is sought from participants periodically on how the process is working for them. And community partners have input into whether processes should change and how they should be modified.

Transparency. Roles and responsibilities are clearly identified, understood and accepted. All meetings are open to the public and held in venues that are accessible and welcoming to community members. Relevant documents and materials are readily available to the public, and are available prior to the meeting so people are informed and ready to participate fully. Materials that are lengthy or complex are made available with additional lead time to assure community members can review and understand the materials, clarify with bureau staff, and check back with the communities they represent as needed. Adequate time and resources are given for translation of materials and interpretation services and accommodations at meetings and forums as necessary.

Accountability. Resources are applied appropriately to public engagement activities. Community members' time and resources are respected and used effectively. Public involvement processes are evaluated on a regular basis to foster ongoing learning and improvement. Evaluation methods are tailored to different audiences to ensure meaningful feedback from all parties involved in a process, including community members, stakeholder groups, staff and management. Best practices are identified and shared.

While reading the above list, members of the public who regularly interact with Montgomery County government might recognize some indicators that are used by some Executive branch Departments or other governmental entities some of the time, in certain decision making or policy-setting processes. But adoption of these community involvement principles by all facets of County government would go a long way to creating policies and projects for which problems are identified early, conflict is reduced, and outcomes are more predictable and meet with greater acceptance.

The process outlined in the Portland Principles is designed to help local government better understand community opinions and needs. And it aims to leave neighborhoods stronger and better informed, increasing their capacity to participate in the future and to develop new leaders. It looks like a sound blueprint for developing an atmosphere of greater public confidence and trust in government--something which seems to be in short supply at the moment.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net