

Informing the Public Debate: Public Education Strategies

Part two of six



Communication with stakeholders and the general public is central to establishing new public policy. Communication needs take one of three forms: information flowing from local officials to the public — public education; information flowing from the public to local officials — public participation; and the overall management of information to create an environment conducive to decision making — public relations. This publication deals with the first of three strategies for managing public communication.

What is Public Issues Education?

The city commission holds a neighborhood meeting to inform residents about a new youth curfew proposal. The county commission requests that agents from the local K-State Research and Extension office initiate a speaker's bureau to discuss water quality protection alternatives in concert with a city-county water planning initiative. The mayor writes a monthly column in the local paper to discuss topics addressed by the commission.

Whenever local government tries to inform and educate the public about issues being discussed and decided, public issues education is taking place. Raising community awareness is a key element in the process. Public issues education is intended to create greater interest among citizens by focusing on the facts and alternatives being considered by local government.

An informed public debate begins by fostering community-wide awareness, interest, and knowledge about the issue. Concurrently, efforts are needed to dispel ignorance and misinformation that often surrounds controversial issues. The "alternatives and consequences" approach to public education focuses the debate on the feasibility of alternatives and helps place value-based preferences in the proper context.

About this Series

Public issues are matters of widespread concern in the community. They are resolved by group decision processes that create local public policy. We often assume the responsibility for resolving public issues is in the domain of government. But as society becomes more complex, and we acknowledge the limits of what government can achieve, we recognize the need for public and private interests to work together. Involving diverse interests in public issues, however, can often heighten local conflict and make the resolution of community issues more difficult.

Keeping on Track, a series of publications for local officials and community leaders, deals with managing controversial public policy. The issues vary, but all too often the problem is the same. Whether it's corporate farming, school bond issues, or new development proposals, communities often get bogged down in controversy, and nothing seems to get done. This series of publications presents strategies local leaders can use to navigate the minefield of controversial public policy so the community can resolve the issue and keep moving forward.

The Alternatives and Consequences Approach to Public Education

Policy choices will affect individuals and groups in the community differently. There will seldom be such clear advantages or disadvantages that everyone will agree on a choice. In sorting through alternatives, individuals need a systematic process for understanding the relative benefits and liabilities associated with choices.

A highly recommended form of public issues education is the alternatives and consequences approach. It



focuses on presenting the range of feasible alternatives for addressing an issue. For each alternative, the likely consequences are identified. Rather than starting with a focus on value-based positions or creating a ranking of a particular group's preferences, all the alternatives are presented. This can be of great help when trying to conceptualize not only a problem, but what can be done about it.

Consider the following statements:

- “Do we need to increase the sales tax?”
- “Are our current local government revenues adequate?”

Which is likely to encourage discussion of alternatives? Which is value-laden?

Public issues education differentiates between facts, values, and myths, placing most emphasis on facts. Emphasizing fact focuses the discussion on what is possible rather than what different interests believe ought to be. This, in turn, can be helpful to local officials who must balance public interests with financial concerns, legal constraints, and administrative feasibility. An educated public can be a significant asset in this process.

Some other approaches to public issues education ...

Public issues education can be accomplished in several ways. Each approach has strengths and drawbacks. Regardless of the approach, it is important to have an educational goal articulated and to be able to tell when it has been achieved.

The **scientific approach** focuses on logic and method. A scientist or well-respected expert in the field sets criteria with which to evaluate alternative solutions to a public problem. While this approach has appeal, the criteria with which to judge alternatives are also based on some sort of value system. Any value-based criteria can be problematic when evaluating alternatives.

The **promotional approach** is used by someone who feels strongly enough to try and “sell” the merit of an alternative. In this approach, image and exaggeration are often present, and substance may be lacking. The solution is promoted rather than analyzed.

The **analytical approach** focuses on the pros and cons of alternatives. While this seems reasonable, the very idea of pros and cons reduces objectivity. The words “pro” and “con” have very different connotations than does “consequence.” With consequences, no solution is categorized as positive or negative. It will be adopted based on its effectiveness in resolving the issue and its feasibility in the judgement of the public and policy makers.

Local Government Roles in Public Issues Education

Local government is a vital community institution. Its scope of responsibilities and access to staff and resources allows it to serve several essential roles in helping the community respond to need or cope with change. Among its chief contributions is the capacity to generate and disseminate information related to issues of concern. This allows local government to serve several roles in meeting community information needs. Local government can be a powerful force for educating the public in ways that will benefit community prospects.

Forecaster: Local governments have decision makers and professional staff who monitor external issues and trends that have potential to affect the community. In some cases, new mandates from broader levels of government may require local organization and action. Broader national and global trends may indicate the need for local responses. Forward-thinking local leaders can use public education to help the community understand the need for action that will better position the community to meet future challenges.

Advisor: Local government has access to superior information resources and professional staff who can sort and evaluate relevant information and make recommendations about current or future needs. As such, local government is in a position to advise other community institutions about anticipated needs and strategies to respond. An example is the county planning department working with local builders to create infrastructure specifications and building and design standards.

Facilitator: Local government is one of the local institutions with the credibility and legitimacy to serve as public mediator on a controversial issue. There may be no better center for public debate on an issue. In addition to bringing differing interests together to communicate, local officials can gain valuable information to assist later decision-making. The very act of bringing people together to express their views in a controlled setting begins the process of bridging differences or finding compromise.

Decision maker: Ultimately, local elected officials need to make choices. Exercising their role as policy maker in a representative system is the pinnacle of the democratic process. In fulfilling that role is yet another public education opportunity to explain both the decision and the rationale for the choices made. Stakeholder groups will want assurance of having been heard. The electorate will want the opportunity to evaluate the performance of elected decision makers.

Developing a Public Education Strategy

Many people identify the need for public education as a partial solution to many local issues and problems. Almost every local government department and professional staff person will indicate that public education is a component of their professional responsibilities. The truth is that few departments embrace that responsibility to the degree required to have an impact on the issue of concern, and fewer yet execute their public education programs well.

Public education is a big job. A successful public education program requires a commitment of resources, sustained effort, and a sense of shared responsibility among multiple partners. To have the desired impact of enhancing overall community understanding related to an issue requires coordinated and persistent efforts in varied formats. This section discusses some of the elements of a successful public issues education strategy.

Development of a strategy begins by articulating the issue, situation, audience, and goals. It may seem basic, but a sound strategy leaves little to chance.

1. Identify the issue or concern. Document the issue clearly and specifically. Assess the relationships involved. Determine whether the issue is actually a problem, or a symptom of something else to be addressed.
2. Document the history of the issue in the community, including who has been involved in the past, who is likely to have useful background information, and who is likely to be most affected by the issue. Identify organizations that have been formed or have expressed interest in the issue, including those currently defunct.
3. To the extent local government will be taking some action related to the issue, determine who will be making decisions and when.
4. Identify information relevant to the issue and its resolution. Analyze the information to determine any value positions or potential myths or misunderstandings that may hinder a factual discussion of alternative solutions.
5. Consider the consequences of the choices, recognizing that decisions relating to who pays and how enforcement occurs may be controversial.
6. Establish a clear statement of what the educational program would seek to accomplish. Is the program intended to clarify the issue? Build consensus? Share information? Challenge values? Break down myths and misunderstanding? Render some sort of a solution?

7. Determine the degree of legitimacy and trust local government or its agents have in representing the issue. Determine whether an intermediary may be needed, or who may be in the best position to represent the issue.
8. Identify trusted local experts who may be of assistance, and determine their willingness to become involved.
9. Identify the resources needed to carry out the public education program, including financial and staff resources and the time frame for the effort.
10. Develop a media strategy, identifying background information useful for reporters, deciding who will serve as spokespersons, and determining how press releases and other communication will be distributed.
11. Make a clear statement of the potential problem points and other disadvantages that may accrue to the local government or its agents.

Perspectives on Public Education

Once an overall strategy has been developed, specific events and activities should be organized. Over time, people experienced with public speaking and outreach education learn what makes a public meeting more or less effective. Following are a few practical points for the person who will serve as the speaker or educator at a public meeting. While the focus relates to a public meeting, the principles also apply to other educational activities and methods.

1. When planning a meeting, be clear about what is to be accomplished. The goal of the meeting should be explicit and limited. Frequently, too much is expected from one meeting. It is difficult and ill-advised to mix too many purposes within a single event. It is generally better to keep educational objectives separate from citizen input objectives. Keep both separate from decision making.
2. Recognize the limits of events. A single meeting is unlikely to be successful in reaching the full target audience. Similarly, one approach will not be sufficient. An effective public education program will employ multiple methods and opportunities over a sustained period of time.
3. Target the audience. Issue invitations where possible, and always target the audience by the message. Identify the stake a given audience is likely to have, and focus on their concern. Provide an overview of important points as appropriate but focus on the concerns relevant of that audience.

4. Select the right person/organization for the job. When an issue is controversial, it is often helpful to have respected intermediaries who are perceived as impartial leading a discussion.
5. Give the target audience a reason to care; use a “hook.” The issue has to be made personally relevant for an individual to invest the time and energy to attend a meeting or read a newsletter. For those directly affected, no hook may be needed. If the target is more general, lead with the point likely to have personal relevance to capture attention.
6. Don’t try to cover too much ground. It becomes difficult to cover vast expanses of information in a single, brief meeting. An educational communication should be specific and have limited objectives.
7. Be explicit at the start of a meeting about what will be dealt with and what will not. Provide an overview of what to expect, and be explicit about the limitations. If the purpose of the meeting is to provide information, people should not assume decisions will be made.
8. Impressions count. Attractive materials and lively presentations are more effective.
9. Never bluff through a point when uncertain, and never make things up. If the answer to a question is unknown, say so. It is better to get back to a person with accurate information than to be known or suspected as untruthful or ignorant.

Educational Outreach Techniques

The goal of a public policy education program is to convey information to a segment of the community. Specific objectives and target audiences can vary. Objectives might include creating general awareness related to some need, informing stakeholders about a specific proposal, or increasing general knowledge regarding a topic. The target audience may be broad or narrow. Regardless of the objective and target audience, there are a number of methods useful for public education.

Following are the more common educational outreach techniques available to local officials, together with a few points regarding their effective use. The flow of communication is generally one-way, from decision makers to an external audience.

Public Presentations

Public presentations can impart a great deal of information in a short amount of time. With flexibility and imagination, there are a wide variety of groups, meetings and organizations willing to learn about community issues.

Presentations work best if kept short and limited to three to five or six main points. Most people lose interest in a lecture and retain only a small percentage of what was heard. So, it is imperative to find the point of relevance for the audience and to keep the presentation short, to the point, lively, and attractive. Presentations are enhanced with visual aids, handouts, or other ways of mixing the mode of information delivery.

It is best not to read a presentation, but instead to use eye contact to connect to individuals in the audience. Use hand gestures or feel free to move, but be aware of nervous mannerisms that may be distracting. Preface important points by saying what is coming next is important.

Radio and TV Interviews

Interviews can highlight the critical areas of importance. The interviewer will generally provide an indication of the subject to be addressed and how the interview is likely to be used. It also can be helpful to the interviewer in some circumstances to be given a list of questions or talking points.

It is imperative to be concise and to the point for a news interview. Replies should be free of jargon or technical language. Comments are typically in general terms rather than detailed specifics.

Think about the two or three important points to make and get them out quickly. A good technique to avoid having only a partial quote used is to lead into a response with pointed language such as, “The three things we accomplished tonight were ...,” or “The three important things to remember are ...”

Newsletters

Newsletters can be an informative and useful means of communication if they are well-written, timely, and of importance to the audience. A written communication of this type can be used to keep stakeholders updated and to dispel misinformation and rumors. A newsletter may be among the best tools to communicate with those who have an expressed interest in a sensitive topic.

A newsletter will only be of use if it is read, meaning there must be information of value and relevance to the reader. It can require a significant amount of staff time to do well. Newsletters also can be expensive to produce and mail.

Information Brochures

Often displayed in public places or inserted into billings, brochures can reach an audience particularly interested in a topic. If the need is for broader dissemination of information, a more general communication

approach, such as a speakers bureau or media releases, is advised.

Local Access Television

Not much is known about how successful local access television is in reaching a target audience. Many public access cable stations will televise significant local government meetings. Some also produce and/or air feature shows, providing an opportunity for in-depth discussion of complex topics. Effective use of television, however, requires significant preparation and a camera-savvy visual sense.

Internet and World Wide Web Pages

New communication technologies are growing rapidly. Increasingly, local governments are taking advantage of this technology by developing “home pages” on the Internet. This technology is a good way to provide information about upcoming business and access to information and documents. In addition, many communities are using e-mail to send out meeting agendas and community newsletters.

Of course, the Internet only works for those who have access and know how to use it. Similarly, good Web page design requires skill, but new software is making the task ever simpler. The site also requires maintenance to keep it current.

Displays

Tabletop or freestanding displays for use at public events are often popular, but people will seldom spend more than 60 seconds observing them. A few key points

need to be presented in a graphically pleasing manner to be effective. A well done display can convey memorable imagery that may help create a positive image of the project or topic. It can also be an effective “hook” to encourage people to talk about a topic or pick up printed materials.

Newspaper Columns/News Releases/Letters to the Editor

Most communities have a core of local residents who read the newspaper daily. A well-written column, news release, or letter to the editor can reach a fairly large segment of the community, but not necessarily key stakeholders. Other local media also read the newspaper and may pick up the story. Columns and letters related to sensitive topics have the potential to rouse great response.

It is important that news releases and columns be accurate, well-written, and unbiased. They also need to be free of errors in grammar, spelling, and syntax.

Conclusion

A key element to the resolution of any public issue is the capacity of community leaders to communicate effectively with constituents and interest groups. This publication suggests ways to foster a knowledgeable discussion of the issues.

In addition to the ability to communicate effectively, other elements to resolving public controversies include demonstrating leadership capacity and the ability to resolve conflicts and disputes. These topics are included in the other editions of this series.

This is one in a series of publications dealing with the issue of managing controversial public policy. The entire series includes:

- Leadership in the Public Arena
- Informing the Public Debate: Public Education Strategies
- Meaningful Input to Public Policy: Citizen Participation Strategies
- The Public Relations of Public Policy
- Successful Negotiating Skills
- Resolving Multiparty Disputes

Individually or together, these resources are intended to help local officials and others develop greater leadership capacity.

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