

CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Community meetings are an important tool to solicit and maintain community interest and involvement in community economic development. To ensure effectiveness, attention needs to be given to many aspects before, during and after the meeting.

Suggestions:

1. Before the meeting

- Determine a date and time which you believe is the most convenient for members of the community. Avoid clashing with other regular community meetings or major sporting events. Consider the most convenient time to ensure maximum participation.
- Determine the best venue. Keep in mind issues like comfort, temperature, opportunity to socialise, acoustics, transport, parking and accessibility.
- Consider the possibility of offering child care facilities.
- Ensure community members received adequate notice - use every creative means to inform and encourage attendance - mailouts, pamphlets, posters, personal invitations, announcements at churches, statements in school bulletins, radio, announcements, press statements.
- Make sure any outside speakers or resource people receive written notification, a map and background information. Ensure they arrive well before the meeting - provide them with a (written) briefing.
- Select an experienced chairperson - who understands the purpose, has excellent public speaking skills and demonstrates a positive approach.
- Ensure an adequate PA system is available.
- Arrive early to set up appropriate room arrangements. People participate best when they can see each other and are close to speakers or resource people. Generally chairs arranged in a horseshoe formation close to speakers is best. Avoid straight rows and placing presenters and leaders on stages or behind tables!
- Ensure adequate seating, but do not put out all chairs, otherwise front rows will remain empty.
- Ensure a layout style which has participants with their backs to entry point.

2. During the meeting

- Provide name tags, and have people to welcome participants on arrival.
- Organise decor, entertainment and refreshments which reinforce a warm, welcoming and interacting atmosphere, eg, pre-meeting tea or coffee, background music, displays, post meeting refreshments to encourage people to stay around afterwards.
- Start on time.
- Provide a warm welcome to all, and any special guests. Clearly state purpose of meeting (use overheads or flip chart paper to reinforce key points and agenda where possible).
- Encourage audience reaction and contribution.
- If meeting involves controversial issues and/or brainstorming functions, ensure ground rules are mentioned and/or distributed.

Example of ground rules.

1. Check in old disputes, feuds and ideologies at the door!
 2. Anything goes! Don't be afraid of new ideas. Respect the opinion of others.
 3. Keep ideas, opinions and comments short.
 4. Allow everyone to contribute.
 5. Focus on the positive. Avoid spending time blaming others and dwelling on what has not happened in the past.
- Appoint someone as scribe to record the key points and decisions.
 - At the end of the meeting, provide a summary of any agreed outcomes and future actions.
 - Thank people for coming, and if post meeting refreshments are provided encourage them to stay on and enjoy it.
 - Acknowledge individuals/groups who have contributed to the organisation of the meeting.

3. After the meeting

- Make sure outcomes of meetings are communicated to participants and the wider public via press, mailouts, flyers or pamphlets, use of radio talk shows and phone in programmes.
- Seek feedback from participants.