

# involving the public

## IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By Ruth Ann Bramson, Ph.D.



Media briefings are used to inform the public but rarely accommodate feedback.

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Over the past few decades, citizens have become much more actively involved in making public decisions and solving public problems. This seems to be happening for a number of reasons, among them: more legislation requiring public participation, citizen demands for involvement in decisions that affect their lives, and changing professional values on the part of public officials. As a consequence, the nature of the economic development official's job is changing. Many officials who previously worked primarily with business and government executives are finding that they now must engage with a wide range of community members in order to get things done.

There are challenging questions for economic development officials to answer: When should the

public be involved in making and implementing public decisions? What form should involvement take? How should these determinations be made as various issues arise? On some public decisions, statutory requirements or the directives of elected officials mandate that the public must be involved. But, only rarely do they specify what form that participation should take. Typically, economic developers have considerable discretion about how, when, and to what extent to involve the community. Public involvement means many different things. If participation is to be successful, those involved need a common language and understanding of various options and approaches. This article provides the starting point for a dialogue among economic development officials, policymakers, and community members regarding the levels and implications of public involvement in economic development projects.

An interesting case in point is the town of Southold, on the North Fork of Long Island, which has historically had an agricultural, fishing, and tourism-based economy. Now, the area is facing development pressures, escalating real estate prices, and a severe shortage of affordable housing for employees of local businesses. Should local residents be involved in decisions about affordable housing units and other new development? If so, in what way should the public be involved and to what degree? Should the town supervisor, town board, and staff make the decisions based on their economic and demographic data and then launch an educational campaign to sell their policy decisions to the public? Should officials consult with community members by holding meetings in which proposals are put before the public and comments are sought? Or, should the hamlets within the town be empowered to envision their futures by defining where they want the boundaries of their commercial centers, identifying suitable locations for development, and partnering with the town on implementation? These are the kinds of choices about

### IT'S MORE THAN JUST HOLDING A FEW MEETINGS

In the course of their work, economic development officials face many situations that cause them to consider to what degree to involve the public. While statutory requirements sometimes require public participation in decision making, only rarely do they specify how that should be accomplished. This article poses questions and a framework of five levels of public involvement to assist economic developers in thinking about the options and trade-offs.

levels of public involvement that face officials responsible for economic development issues in large and small communities everywhere.

## DIFFERENTIATING LEVELS OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

In 1969, Sherry Arnstein originally published her well-known article, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” in which she defined citizen participation in terms of a ladder with eight rungs corresponding to the degrees of power available to participants in determining the end product of a public problem solving process.<sup>1</sup> More recent authors, including John Clayton Thomas, David Wilcox, and groups such as the International Association for Public Participation, have consolidated and adapted Arnstein’s concept of levels of public participation in a variety of ways. This article utilizes their work in delineating five levels of public involvement.

In this framework of five levels, the first level is public participation which is limited to giving information and informing the public about decisions made by public officials, without direct involvement or influence from the public. Examples include distributing brochures and other printed materials, making presentations at meetings, and conducting media briefings. The second level involves consulting with the public by inviting comments and feedback on government proposals, but not soliciting ideas from the public nor engaging citizens in implementing plans. Methods include surveys, focus groups, and public forums. At level three, shared decision making, public officials and citizens generate options together, choose among them, and agree on an implementation plan. Methods include large and small group deliberative dialogues and community problem solving processes. Level four, taking action jointly, involves more permanent partnerships with other stakeholders such as collaborative agreements. Providing support for community generated initiatives, level five, involves assisting stakeholders to carry out their own plans through offers of grants, technical support, training and organizational development, contingent upon meeting agreed upon performance standards. This produces five levels of public involvement, ranging from providing information only to the public, to empowering and supporting stakeholders in developing and implementing their own plans.<sup>2</sup> (See Exhibit 1 – Levels of Involvement<sup>3</sup>)

Obviously, this model of five levels of public involvement is a simplification. One could design a framework of public participation with many more delineations. The distinctions among the levels are rarely as clear as this framework suggests. The levels incorporate and build on one another and frequently a public participation process will begin at one level and later move to others. But, the model illustrates a reality that is too often missed – that there are significant gradations of public participation.

Knowing that these gradations exist and having a tool for distinguishing among them can help economic development officials cut through confusing rhetoric about public participation from colleagues, citizens, and political power holders. Hopefully, it will also be helpful in moving skeptical officials beyond the notion that public participation means just holding a few meetings and talking to people.

## CONSIDERATIONS AFFECTING THE EXTENT OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The first task of an economic development official charged with managing a decision making process is to decide whether to involve the public. If that decision is “yes,” to what extent should citizens be involved and how much authority should be shared? There is no consistent answer to these questions. Public involvement is more important on some issues and under some conditions than others. In order to make a sound decision about the level of public involvement needed, economic development officials would be wise to consider their objectives, the nature of the issue, timing, resources, stakeholders, and their own role in the process. The following questions can help in doing that:

### *What do you hope to accomplish with the public?*

The essential first step in any public participation effort is to clarify your objectives. A key part of this analysis is to think about the issue you are trying to address and ask: “What level of support do we need from the public?” The answer to this question can

**Exhibit 1. Levels of Public Involvement**



*Adapted from Awakening Participation*

determine whether your objectives are simply to offer the public a chance to provide feedback, or if you need their direct involvement in order to solve the problem.

***Is the community facing a highly complex or technical issue?***

Some issues are relatively easy for the public to understand and participate in, while others, requiring technical background and expertise, may be quite difficult. Such issues may not be well suited for significant levels of public involvement. Other public decisions require greater adherence with quality and professional standards, legislative mandates, or budgetary constraints. When public agencies pretend to the public that they are open to alternatives, when, in reality, the decision has already been made, this damages the agency's credibility on the current issue and on others in the future. The cardinal rule is to be honest with the public. In any event, technically complex issues require a good public information effort before the public can be expected to participate.

It is good to remember that issues that initially appear to be technical or professional questions, often reveal themselves to involve deeply held community values. For example, a decision to reroute traffic and alter parking restrictions in order to assist small businesses in one neighborhood is likely to be a political as well as a technical decision because it impacts different groups within the community differently. Tax abatement in one neighborhood may hurt merchants in adjacent communities.

***Is the community facing tough choices in which trade-offs must be made?***

Some of the most difficult issues that communities face are those involving tough tradeoffs, when limits have to be faced, and there is no consensus in the community regarding how to make the needed choices. When people have not had an opportunity to talk about issues and choices, they often slide into denial and wishful thinking and are unable to confront the choices that need to be made. Instead, they look for scapegoats, and public officials present a convenient target. Today, many communities are finding they must make tough decisions about allocating tight budgets and need to know where citizens place their priorities. It is particularly difficult when the public is forced to face limitations. Under such conditions, public involvement should provide community members with an opportunity

to hear one another's views, weigh alternatives, and participate in decision making.

***Are values at issue and is there likely to be community conflict?***

Elected bodies become deeply divided when citizens are not in agreement about what goals or outcomes they want to achieve. Under such circumstances, communities often become polarized with people forming themselves into separate political camps that distrust one another. When politicians reach gridlock on important public issues and seem unable to make a decision and stick with it, they often look for ways to involve the public.

Many economic development issues arouse strong feelings because they affect values. When values are in conflict, standard strategies for simply informing the public such as workshops, public hearings, or distributing brochures don't work very well. On issues related to community values, educational efforts frequently just contribute to the conflict, with citizens disputing and challenging the

facts. Citizens angrily ask, "Whose facts are those?" When positions are hardened and groups are focused on winning the issue, it becomes difficult to make decisions and move forward. The importance that groups attach to an issue will impact their participation. Under such circumstances, it can be very helpful to engage community members in deliberative dialogue about their experiences, attitudes, and opinions about the pros and cons of basic choices. This



*Providing background information to citizens is essential to all levels of participation.*

is what happened in Riverhead, New York, when community members were engaged in a dialogue process using the Study Circles methodology to talk about issues related to growth and the community's future.

***Is this an issue which can only be resolved if many individuals and groups work together to create a solution?***

Most of us recognize, by now, that the most difficult and challenging problems facing our communities cannot be solved by senior level public officials working out a technically competent and politically acceptable solution. Many public problems, whether it is crime prevention, drug abuse, or job readiness, can only be resolved by ordinary citizens learning to adjust and working out their own solutions. This brutal reality is often resisted by both citizens, who would like for government to solve community problems for them, and by managers, who resent the extra time and trouble of

designing and implementing a public involvement process. Joint decision making can be a powerful process for helping community members and public officials to move beyond denial and scapegoating and take individual as well as collective action to solve community problems.

### ***Is the issue “ripe”?***

There are timing issues for economic development officials to think about in determining when an issue is “ripe” for community involvement. The ripeness of an issue is determined primarily by considering which issues are generating a sense of urgency in the community. Citizens are likely to be much more responsive to an issue about which they already feel some urgency. Daniel Yankelovich has written about issue cycles. He describes the early part of the issue cycle as a time when there is little interest or sense of urgency and it is hard to get people together to talk about an issue. In the late part of the cycle, when the issue has already been widely debated and received a lot of media attention, he says, it is once again difficult to get the public involved. There is an opening in the middle of the issue cycle when people are most likely to listen to one another and consider a range of views.<sup>4</sup> Frequently, a dramatic event or the release of a report or study will provide the opening for directing attention toward a public problem. It takes practice, trial and error, and good political instincts to identify where an issue is in its cycle and find the opening for public deliberation and decision making.

There are advantages for economic development officials in initiating issues with the public rather than always waiting for issues to be thrust upon them. By initiating action there is greater likelihood that a decision can be reached before time pressures take over and dominate the process. It also provides an opportunity to learn about public preferences and concerns and frame an issue in terms

more acceptable to all sides, before a crisis develops. Community visioning and scenario building processes are examples of strategies for taking the initiative.

### ***What are our time and resource constraints?***

The degree to which the public is able to be involved in community problem solving is often determined by available resources. Schedules, budgets, and staffing may place limits on the type of involvement that takes place or on the number of stakeholders that can be contacted and invited to participate. Even with sufficient resources there are still tradeoffs between the number of citizens that can be involved in making decisions and how involved they become in the process. As the level of involvement increases there is typically a decline in the total number of stakeholders who are able to participate. Without adequate time or staffing, a public participation effort will be limited to the dissemination of information and possibly an opportunity for public feedback and comment. The role citizens can play will also be determined by the capacity and experience in public problem solving of both the economic development staff and the citizens. The knowledge and skills required to design and guide multi-stakeholder public decision making processes are not intuitive. They must be learned and practiced. That is why more graduate programs in public administration and in-service training for working professionals are now offering courses in collaborative problem solving and participative decision-making.

### ***Who are the stakeholders for this issue and what are their views?***

Economic development officials responsible for public participation must define which groups and individuals in the community are likely to be interested in an issue and gain a sense of the opinions

## **Exhibit 2. Public Involvement Levels and Approaches: In Summary**

<b>Level Approach</b>	<b>Inform</b>	<b>Consult</b>	<b>Decide Jointly</b>	<b>Act Jointly</b>	<b>Support</b>
<b>Typical Process</b>	Presentation & promotion	Communication and Feedback	Consensus Building	Partnership Building	Community Development
<b>Typical Methods</b>	Brochures, press releases, websites, newsletters, public presentations	Surveys, polls, meetings	Workshops, deliberative dialogue sessions, community visioning	Partnerships, coalitions, collaborative agreements	Technical support, funding
<b>Stance of Economic Development Officials</b>	“Here’s what we’re going to do.”	“Here are our options—what do you think?”	“Let’s develop options and decide actions together.”	“We want to carry out joint decisions together.”	“We can help you achieve what you want within these guidelines.”
<b>Issues for Economic Development Officials</b>	Will people accept no consultation?	Are the options realistic? Are there other options?	Do we have similar ways of deciding? Do we know and trust each other?	Can we work together? Where will the balance of control be?	Will our goals be met as well as those of other interests?
<b>Needed to Start</b>	Clearly defined message. Identified audience, common language.	Realistic options, ability to deal with responses.	Readiness to accept new ideas and implement decisions.	Willingness to learn new ways of working.	Commitment to continued support.

Adapted from “The Guide to Effective Participation” by David Wilcox

they hold. It is often said that all who wish to participate should have the opportunity to do so. In reality, however, not all stakeholders participate to the same degree or in the same way. In almost all successful public involvement initiatives, a core group of people is involved throughout the process and others are engaged at various points along the way. A manager who anticipates public agreement with agency goals may be inclined to share more authority; a manager who anticipates disagreement or who does not know what to anticipate may feel the need to retain more authority in order to protect agency goals. In the former situation, the manager might involve the public in decision making, while in the latter, the manager might only consult them. If an issue is value-laden and conflict within the public is anticipated, greater public involvement may be called for in order to place some of the responsibility on community members for resolving the conflict.<sup>5</sup> (See Exhibit 2 – Public Involvement Levels and Approaches: In Summary<sup>6</sup>)



*When consulting with the public, it is important to have a plan for collecting and reporting public comment.*

## LEVELS OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

### INFORM

Providing information to citizens is essential to all levels of participation. People need to have information about an issue in order to decide whether they want to get involved. In some situations simply informing citizens about the decisions made by public officials is the appropriate level of public participation; for example: when there is a clear legal requirement that stipulates the course of action which must be taken, when there is only one possible course of action, when there is a professional, scientific, or health standard which must be adhered to, or when there is insufficient time or resources for a participatory process. Many local governments do a very effective job of providing information to businesses and residents about

upcoming road construction that will affect their neighborhoods. They employ multiple modes of communication, utilizing neighborhood meetings, press releases, direct mailings with maps and timetables, signs, bill inserts, door hangers. Once capital projects move to the construction stage the time for meaningful public input in decision making is usually over.

Frequently, when the information-only approach is used, little or no response is received from the target audience, since they have not been asked to become involved. Many public meetings are of the information-only variety allowing for little or no opportunity for the public to express feelings, thoughts or concerns. When an issue is not clearly defined or when there are many alternatives and people interested in exploring them, it is not sufficient to just provide information to the public.

### Consider This:

Before deciding on an information-only approach:

- Have you identified the stakeholders and what they already know about the issue?
- Is information-only likely to satisfy them?
- Are you prepared to communicate your agency's message in a clear and convincing way?
- Have you selected communication methods that fit your budget, available time, and audience?
- Are you prepared to move to other levels of involvement if people want more than just information?<sup>7</sup>

### CONSULT

Once the public has been informed about an issue, the next level of involvement is to provide forums and mechanisms for consulting with citizens to learn their ideas, feelings and concerns. Consultation involves offering people an opportunity to comment on proposals and options regarding what actions to take, but not in developing strategies or implementing solutions. Under some circumstances targeted individuals or stakeholder groups are consulted, in other circumstances the general public is consulted. Consultation is appropriate when you want to improve a service or when there are a clear and limited number of options for addressing a problem. This is not a suitable approach when you are not clear on which direction you want to go and are looking for ideas from the public.

Consultation provides for two-way communication but gives very little real power to participants. If this approach is used, economic developers should not expect extensive support from grassroots organizations or individuals who are not involved in generating ideas or in decision making and who have little power to affect the agency's direction. Consultation methods include opinion

surveys, focus groups, advisory committees, and meetings with public comment periods. If used properly, consultation can form the foundation that lets meaningful participation occur by explaining the decisions which were made and then the feedback loop is closed by reporting back to participants and letting them know their opinions were heard and considered in the development of plans and decisions.

In a northeastern U.S. city, a regional economic development initiative has included dozens of community meetings, interviews, and public surveys, but the regional planning agency has been so overwhelmed with collecting and analyzing the data received that it has been unable to report back to participants in almost two years to let them know what was learned and how the information will be used by decision makers. When citizens are consulted about public decisions and take the time to participate, they deserve to receive a summary of the public input and learn how their comments have been utilized.

#### **Consider This:**

Before deciding to consult with the public:

- Do you know who the stakeholders are with whom you need to consult and how to contact them?
- Can you present your agency's proposal and plan for achieving it in a clear and convincing manner?
- Do you have a plan for collecting and reporting public comment?
- Are you committed to listening, or are you just looking for endorsement of your own plans?
- Are you prepared to move to another level of involvement if people want more than consultation?

### **DECIDE JOINTLY**

Many issues that face economic development officials call for extensive public involvement in which influence must be shared with the public. These are the situations when public acceptance of a decision is needed for successful implementation. This kind of sharing creates challenges for government managers as well as for the public. But it is only by participating in the decision making process that community members develop ownership of the solution. Deciding together means involving the public in generating ideas and then choosing from the options which to implement. This approach is particularly appropriate when it is important that community members own the solution, and when you need the new ideas that they can bring. The time required for involving the public in a decision making process is greater than the previous two approaches. Methods include large and small group deliberative dialogue processes, design

charettes, community visioning, and strategic planning processes.

In a Massachusetts town, the annual budget process broke down every year over decisions regarding capital spending and the economic health of the community. The School Committee argued that population growth necessitated a new elementary school. The Library Board wanted a library annex, senior citizens wanted an expansion of the Senior Center, athletic boosters wanted more ball fields and a swimming pool, and the Town Hall needed more office space. There wasn't enough money to do it all, and certainly not all at once. The town manager enlisted a group of key community stakeholders to serve as a design team for a community planning process. The group decided the town needed a better understanding of community priorities and launched a series of neighborhood meetings at which residents focused on their values and hopes for the community's future and gave priority rankings to various proposals for capital expenditures. A month later a community-wide meeting was held at which the results from the neighborhood meetings were reviewed and a ten year capital plan was endorsed which was later adopted by the Town Board in official session. Today, four years later, the ten year capital plan continues to guide annual budget decisions. Because key stakeholders feel a sense of ownership, challenges to the plan have been minor.



*When involving the public in discussions, be sure you are open to their ideas about strategies and solutions.*

#### **Consider This:**

Before deciding to engage community members in decision making:

- Are you open to other people's ideas about the problem?
- Have you been clear with community members about where the decision making authority rests?
- Have you identified all the stakeholders who need to be involved?
- Have you framed the issue in clear understandable language that people can relate to?
- Have you involved people with skills and experience in joint decision making?
- Do you have the authority to follow through on the solutions decided by community members?

### **ACT JOINTLY**

Acting jointly refers to short or longer term collaborations or partnerships with individuals and

institutions. This involves bringing community members together to both make decisions and take action. This level of involvement is appropriate when one party cannot achieve what it wants on its own. All parties get extra benefits from acting together and there is a commitment to the time and effort needed to develop a partnership. Acting together is not likely to be successful if one party has all the power and uses it to impose its own solutions or if the commitment to partnership is only on the surface. This approach will not work when people want to have a stake in making decisions but not in the long term work of carrying them out. Methods include working with partners on strategic planning, organizational development and creating interim structures like steering committees to facilitate decision making and accountability.

In the early 1990's the government of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada found their economic problems compounded by a ground fish moratorium that had a ripple effect that extended into practically every community in the province. To attempt to find solutions, the provincial government identified a need for a new approach which involved public input in the design, development, and implementation of programs for community and regional planning through Regional Economic Development Boards (REDBs). The REDBs were made up of key stakeholders, including government, the business community, community-based groups, and individual citizens. The initial successes which some of the REDBs have achieved demonstrates to the provincial government that this approach can make a major contribution in improving local economies.

Performance contracts and formal agreements have been important in defining roles and responsi-

bilities and funding commitments for successful partnerships. Engaging the skills, knowledge and resources of the community in economic development is requiring an investment of time and resources. The provincial government is providing training and support in areas such as strategic planning, community development principles and practices, board governance, alternative dispute resolution, meeting management, group dynamics, leadership and motivation, legal issues, and communication.<sup>8</sup> For success, at a minimum, collaborations require clarity about the target problem and key stakeholders, ground rules for working together, and a long term commitment to capacity building.

#### **Consider This:**

Before making a commitment to act jointly:

- Are you clear about your goals and how flexible you are able to be in pursuing them?
- Have you identified potential partners who share a similar vision and might be interested in collaborating to achieve it?
- Do you have the time and other resources necessary to create a partnership?
- Are you prepared to share power and other resources?

#### **SUPPORT**

Supporting community initiatives views public involvement as empowerment. This involves helping to build people's assets and organizational capacity. This approach is most appropriate where citizens are motivated and ready to run an initiative themselves. It requires a commitment to ongoing support, such as offers of grants and contracts, training and technical support, and help for community groups in setting goals, planning action, and creating new organizational structures. Supporting community-based initiatives involves viewing people as the primary ingredients of economic development. Development should build on people's assets, result from their analysis of the community and its challenges, and stem from local decisions. The practice of public agencies empowering and supporting community initiatives is a recent approach to public problem solving. There is need for further study and refinement.

The federal mandate in the 1993 Empowerment Zone legislation of community based partnerships and resident empowerment presented EZ/EC communities with a challenge. By sending a strong and clear message about the importance of community engagement in the program, the federal government



*Good meeting design enables small group dialogue even in large community meetings.*



Effective public involvement begins with a commitment to listen.

increased the chances that residents and community partnerships shared in the decision making about the zone priorities. These requirements made the EZ/EC sites take affirmative steps, starting with the strategic planning process, to bring community voices to the table. Boston Connects, Incorporated (BCI) is the non-profit organization which the city of Boston designated to handle the procurement and funding of programs within the EZ and to carry out the long term vision of the Boston's Empowerment Zone strategic plan. The Boston EZ experience points up the necessity of attending to building the capacity of zone residents to participate in zone governance and building the capacity of community based organizations to deliver programs. The BCI leadership team would have benefited from training and ongoing coaching in understanding board roles, formal decision making processes, dealing with conflict, and having the confidence to assert views. Without such support, counterparts from private and public sectors are likely to dominate the community development process.

#### Consider This:

Before deciding to support community initiatives:

- Do you understand the various interests in the community and what they need?
- Do community members understand their role?
- Do you understand your role?
- Are you in contact with existing voluntary organizations in the community?
- Are you able to provide the resources and skills that are needed?

## CONCLUSION

Both public agencies and private corporations face major challenges in deciding what level of public involvement is needed on community issues. There is no simple 'how-to' guide for deciding when to involve the public, whom to involve in public decisions, which public participation tools and processes to employ and how to interpret and utilize the public input. Yet these are among the most important and difficult decisions that agencies make.

Too often public involvement programs are initiated with high hopes and good intentions, only to lead to costly and time-consuming dead-ends which are frustrating for everyone involved.

Before launching a participation process, economic developers should pause and consider: What do we want to achieve from the participation process? What do we want to help others achieve? What balance are we willing to strike between involvement and control? The framework presented in this article is interspersed with questions in the hope that they will help to stimulate reflection and discussion by economic development officials as they make these important decisions.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *JAIP*, Vol.35, July 1969, pp. 216-224.
- 2 This framework is based on many different sources, especially helpful was Wilcox, David. *The Guide to Effective Participation*, published by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation, 1994; Thomas, John Clayton. *Public Participation in Public Decisions*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995; *Awakening Participation: Building Capacity for Public Participation in Environmental Decisionmaking*, published by the Regional Environmental Center <http://www.rec.org/REC/Publications/PPTraining/cover.html>, December 1996 and the Public Participation Spectrum developed by IAP2; Creighton, James L., *Involving Citizens in Community Decision Making: A Guidebook*, Creighton and Creighton, Inc., 2003.
- 3 *Awakening Participation: Building Capacity for Public Participation in Environmental Decisionmaking* published by the Regional Environmental Center <http://www.rec.org/REC/Publications/PPTraining/cover.html>.
- 4 Yankelovich, Daniel. quoted in *Guidelines for Creating Effective Study Circle Materials*, 1994, Topsfield Foundation, Inc.
- 5 Thomas, John Clayton. *Public Participation in Public Decisions*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995. pp.56-59.
- 6 Wilcox, David. *The Guide to Effective Participation*, published by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation, 1994.
- 7 In developing the "Consider This" bullet points in this section I utilized and adapted from Wilcox, David. *The Guide to Effective Participation*, published by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation, 1994.
- 8 <http://www.cedresources.nf.net/module6.htm>