THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION HANDBOOK

Making Better Decisions Through Citizen Involvement

James L. Creighton

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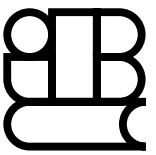

Renaissance Public Participation

Construction [of the Duomo in Florence, Italy] was frequently delayed during the fourteenth century by the diversion of resources to other projects, by disagreements over building plans, and by public indifference and inertia. The construction of the cathedral was primarily a civic, not an ecclesiastical enterprise; the commune provided most of the money for the project, and delegated responsibility for the building to the Lana guild, the corporation of cloth manufacturers. The guild appointed four of its members as *operi,* with six-month terms of office, to supervise the work. These *operi* frequently requested advice from citizens with specialized knowledge—builders, sculptors, painters, goldsmiths—and on a few occasions organized a referendum on building plans in which "every person in the city of whatever status or condition" was invited to participate.

—Gene A. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*

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PREFACE

I've been conducting public participation programs since 1972 when a representative from a government agency called me and said, "There's a new law that's been passed that requires us to hold public meetings to discuss our proposed timber sales. We're spending all our time in our planning meetings discussing how many police we have to have to prevent a riot. Can you do any better?"

Fortunately I was able to do somewhat better, and since then I've been involved in designing and conducting more than three hundred public participation programs on topics as diverse as forest management, water development and water quality, nuclear waste cleanup, prescribed burning, community planning, electric power rates, transportation planning, siting of electric and gas transmission lines and substations, health effects of electric and magnetic fields, welfare reform, low-income housing, and many more.

This book draws on my own experience and the experience of numerous other practitioners in the field. Those of us who have been involved from the early days in the field did not find the answers on how to design an effective public participation program in any one discipline. We borrowed heavily from techniques and skills developed in the group dynamics field, from people like Thomas Gordon, particularly valuable insights on interpersonal communication skills and facilitative meeting leadership. We traded techniques back and forth with people in the organization development field on how to design and conduct interactive meetings. From the field of sociology, we borrowed insights on values research,

interviewing, survey research, and identification of those in the community who are influential. Because public participation always includes a component of communicating information to the public, we used the best we could find in communications theory, as well as the practical insights and skills of people working with the media. For supporting rationale, we turned to the participatory management literature, such as the works of Douglas MacGregor (1960), and later to a new generation of political theorists, such as Carole Pateman (1970) and Benjamin Barber (1984). More recently, the field has been informed by insights from the literature on deliberative democracy, which emphasizes both participation and the creation of mechanisms for informed dialogue (Rawls, 1993; Habermas, 1996; Dryzec, 2000; Macedo, 1999), as well as the field of risk communication (Slovic, 2000; Flynn, Slovic, and Kunreuther, 2001).

The benefit of this eclectic approach was that we were not constrained by any particular discipline that imposed its rules about how things should be done. But this also meant that public participation did not fit comfortably in any one academic discipline. Previous books I've written on public participation have been used in university courses in urban planning, forestry, public relations, political science, civil engineering, and architecture.

The field has been developed largely by people with the bias of the craftsman, not the theorist or academic scientist. As we tried things out, the question was always, "Does this idea or technique help me solve the problem?" If in our own experience it worked, particularly if it worked several times, we added it to our personal tool kit, and others in the field quickly emulated it.

Those who seek rigorous empirical studies to verify all the counsel I offer in this book could be disappointed. Efforts to study public participation empirically have been sporadic and sometimes unconvincing to those actually conducting everyday programs. Some recent works by Beierle and Cayford (2002), Burby (2003), and others hold out hope that this gap is being filled. An extensive literature is developing in Europe, as well as a number of studies related to the use of participation in international development projects.

While this base of empirical research grows, I have presented what I believe is the best available advice based on the actual experience of practitioners. It has worked for me, and I hope it will also work for you.

My thinking has been influenced and informed by working with many other practitioners in the field. I particularly acknowledge colleagues such as Jerome Delli Priscoli, Lorenz Aggens, Martha Rozelle, and others too numerous to mention. There have also been many clients along the way who have contributed with their support and the opportunity to try out new ideas.

My wife, Maggie Creighton, has worked with me in the field off and on since the first client asked for public participation training more than thirty years ago.

Precisely because she approaches things differently than I do, she has taught me how to work with people in ways that would not have occurred to me. She has played a crucial role in my life and in my work.

My thanks to the team at Jossey-Bass—Dorothy Hearst and Allison Brunner—for their enthusiasm and support in making this book possible.

Los Gatos, California James L. Creighton
January 2005

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THE AUTHOR

James L. Creighton, Ph.D., is the president of Creighton & Creighton in Los Gatos, California. He has been an independent consultant in the public participation field since 1972 and has designed or conducted more than three hundred public participation programs. He is the founding president of the International Association for Public Participation, an international organization of professionals and people interested in the public participation field. He is the author of *The Public Participation Manual* (Abt Books, 1981) and *Involving Citizens in Community Decision Making* (National Civic League, 1992), and author or coauthor of four other books, including *Getting Well Again,* an international best seller. He has written more than thirty guides on public participation and related topics for government agencies and trade associations. His client list includes more than fifty federal or state agencies and many companies in the United States and Canada, and he has also been involved in public participation or dispute resolution projects or training in Russia, the Republic of Georgia, Egypt, Brazil, Japan, and Thailand.

THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION HANDBOOK

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a work in progress. Our understanding of what democracy means has evolved over time. There is no one single form of democracy, as the variety in forms of governance in democratic countries illustrates. The challenge is always to realize democracy in practice.

Another experiment in democracy is underway today. Increasingly, public participation in governmental decision making is considered part of the very definition of democracy. Public participation is now a legal requirement or prerequisite for governmental decision making in most of the Western world. Public participation requirements have been embedded in virtually every important piece of environmental legislation in the United States and Canada since the 1970s. More than thirty-five European countries are signatories to the 1998 Aarhus Convention, formally known as the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision Making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, which took effect in 2001. Those signatory governments commit to take steps to ensure public participation and access to information in all environmental decision making. Public participation is also a prerequisite for international economic development project funding by the World Bank and the various regional banks. Many companies have also conducted public participation programs as part of decisions about management of natural resources, siting of facilities, and environmental cleanup or remediation.

The example of public participation in Renaissance Florence shown on the frontispiece of this book clearly illustrates that public participation is not a new discovery. What is new is that public participation in agency decision making is increasingly considered standard practice. Many recent political theorists argue that it is a defining characteristic of modern democracy. As two British theorists recently put it, "Democracy without citizen deliberation and participation is ultimately an empty and meaningless concept" (Pimbert and Wakeford, 2001, p. 23).

It is one thing to make a commitment to public participation in the abstract. It is quite another to do it. There have always been and continue to be challenges translating the ideals of democracy into practical institutions. There are many challenges translating the concept of public participation into the sometimes harsh reality of everyday interaction between agencies or companies and the public. There are the realities of budgets and legal constraints. There is a need to make expeditious decisions. There is a need to base decisions on the best available scientific and technical information, even if at times large segments of the public are badly informed or ignorant of the basic premises of the scientific method. There are external political realities.

This book is written for the thousands of people in federal, state, or local agencies, community organizations, or corporations who see the value of involving the public in decisions made by their organizations but seek practical guidance on how to do this effectively. As the word *handbook* in the title suggests, this is essentially a how-to book, written from the perspective of a practitioner for people who will be designing and conducting public participation programs.

The primary focus of this book is the pragmatics of designing and conducting public participation programs. But some theory is needed, particularly for those new to the field. In Part One, I provide a brief overview of what public participation is, the characteristics of effective public participation, and the benefits that can be derived from its use.

There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all public participation (and beware of people who think there is). But there are critical issues that can make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful program. Part Two provides a thought process for how to design a public participation program. The thought process has three stages—decision analysis, process planning, and implementation planning—with each stage becoming more specific as you move through the thought process. At the end of this thought process, you could arrive at a different solution from someone else addressing the same issues. But you will have a clear rationale for why you are doing what you have decided to do and reasonable confidence that there are not major gaps in your thinking.

Part Three provides an overview of public participation techniques—both techniques for getting information to the public and techniques for getting infor-

mation from or interacting with the public. If you are new to the field, you will probably find it helpful to read both chapters in this part in detail, so that you have a good sense of how and when to use the various techniques set out in this book. If you are already experienced in the field, you may want to skim these chapters, stopping on those techniques with which you are less familiar, or using these chapters as a checklist to remind you of techniques that you could be using.

No matter what kind of public participation program you develop, you will usually end up conducting some kind of meetings. Part Four specifically addresses public meetings, describing different kinds of meeting formats, the thought process for selecting a particular meeting format, designing and conducting interactive meetings, meeting leadership, and meeting logistics.

Part Five contains a series of chapters on the use of general-purpose public participation tools. It contains chapters on working with advisory groups, conducting interviews, working with the media, analyzing public comment, evaluating public comment, and use of consultants.

Part Six contains a single chapter that presents three cases illustrating three very different participation strategies and the reasons for choosing those strategies.

The book ends with a brief coda—a summary of basic themes from throughout the book.

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PART ONE

OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

This book shows how to design and conduct a public participation from beginning to end. But before discussing the mechanics of public participation, the theory of public participation needs to be addressed.

Chapter One provides a definition of public participation. Then it addresses two challenging questions. The first question is, What does *participation* mean? It's fine to say that participation is a virtuous thing. But does that mean only that citizens have a chance to comment before decisions are made, or does it mean that agencies can make decisions only when the public agrees with the agency's proposed action?

The second question is, Why do agencies retain decision-making authority? Many agencies are willing to open up their decision-making processes to the public, but in most circumstances, they stress that they retain the ultimate decision-making authority. Is this undemocratic, or is it necessary to provide accountability in a democratic system?

Chapter Two examines the rationale for public participation. No discussion of public participation is complete without looking at the role of expertise and technical knowledge in decision making. Many technical people, and many of those in agencies, do not perceive the need for public participation in decisions they view as technical in nature. But many decisions agencies view as technical in nature are, in fact, values choices about what is good or important, informed by