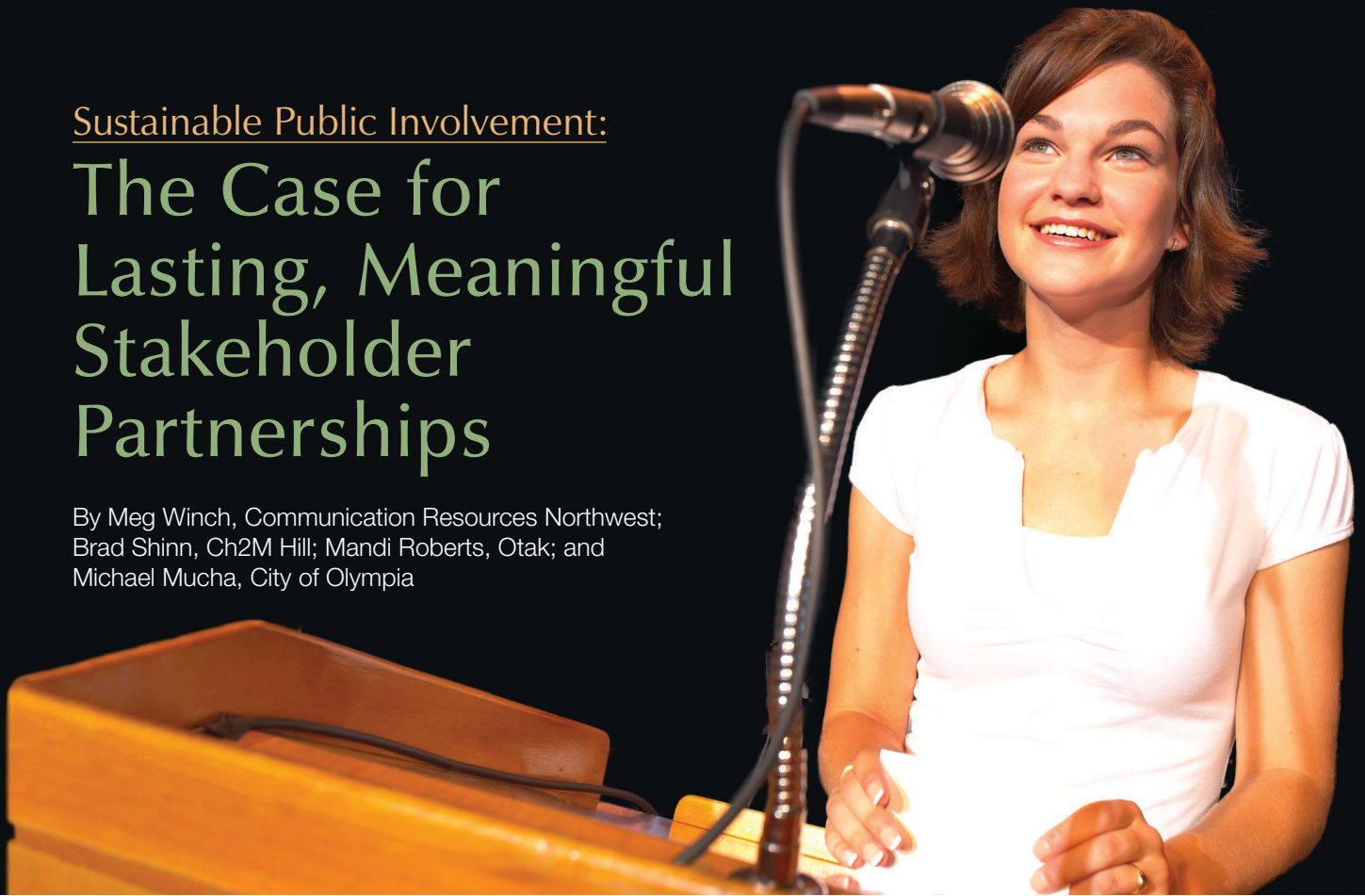


Sustainable Public Involvement:

# The Case for Lasting, Meaningful Stakeholder Partnerships

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**Projects today** require a higher level of public involvement than ever before, whether to satisfy permit conditions, recover from past project problems, or respond to demands for engagement by community stakeholders.

While well-crafted public processes can result in real integration of the public into the design process, this is not the norm across public projects. Something is missing in our approach.

Public involvement generally occurs outside the technical work. Whether due to tight timeframes or overworked team members, it is often limited to one or two obligatory meetings for public comment, without real integration of a community's needs and interests. Sadly, this approach meets the criteria of success, but leaves a somewhat hollow feeling.

Public involvement work is often outsourced to specialty firms whose sole responsibility is to engage the public to meet community or permit requirements using innovative and targeted means and methods. Despite the effectiveness of these processes, the ability for public sentiment or suggestion to actually influence projects depends on the integration of the technical team into the public process, and their willingness/ability to translate input into design and construction solutions.

When done effectively, public involvement will save time during the land use approvals process and permitting reviews, but the benefits are much broader than that. Effective public involvement helps ensure long-term project success.

## **A different way of thinking about public involvement**

Meaningful, integrated public involvement requires a commitment at the government level to forge strong, lasting partnerships with community stakeholders. Public involvement should be perceived as a vehicle to increase project success, not a hurdle to project completion. This requires a willingness to fully share in decision making, and to understand the difference in communication and participation.

Far from being a drag on project schedules and a cost to budgets, it is in communities' best interests to increase public investment in the decisions that drive projects. Research strongly supports the value of participatory decision-making. The extent to which people support a decision is linked with their level of involvement.

In fact, it could be argued that simply integrating public comment in meaningful ways will result in more smoothly run projects. Not only will decisions be more sustainable, but so will whole policies.

Implementing an integrated public involvement process requires an up-front investment of time and money; however, it generally does not expend more time or budget than a process that is simply designed to meet a requirement. The investment up front typically ensures that the project will be completed on time because citizen push-back is highly unlikely.

Public involvement does require planning at the front of the project, and allocating time to respond/react to public comment into the schedule. It also requires having project managers who understand and value public involvement as a vehicle for both short- and long-term success – both for themselves and the organization.

### **A different way of implementing public involvement**

So, how do we create meaningful, integrated – sustainable – public involvement?

From a broad level, public involvement begins when city/county planning staffs embrace the process. It continues by selecting design and construction consultants who also understand and embrace its value. To ensure that this happens, consultants should provide examples of how they view and can assist with gathering and integrating public input into design and construction processes.

The next step is to devise a well-crafted public involvement plan. It can be simple or comprehensive, depending on project scale. It should identify who has an interest in the project (with special attention to those who can kill the project), and a variety of outreach tools and techniques that will appeal to the broadest spectrum of interests. The key is to define the results in terms of expectations or outcomes in the relationship with the community.

Innovative and interactive techniques should be included. Do not assume that everyone in the community will show up to a public meeting. It is best to explore a number of ways to effectively and efficiently obtain input on your projects. Instead of the standard public meetings, an effective strategy might be a design charette, a well-crafted survey, call-in opportunity, web site, or active involvement in key team meetings by members of a citizens' action committee or other group. More important than the method is *how* these tools are used to share decision making.

*“Durable decisions can withstand the inevitable changes that impact public projects, such as funding, timing, and even context.”*

By identifying opportunities for public comment, creating processes that produce meaningful input, and effectively relaying that input to designers/contractors, teams benefit by having more durable project decisions. Durable decisions can withstand the inevitable changes that impact public projects, such as funding, timing, and even context.

Do not be discouraged if the turn-out is not what you hoped for – in essence, you are measuring the quality of the relationship. For some people, it is enough to know that there is an open, participatory (yet decisive) process that asks them to help decide. Be sure to communicate this clearly and often.

Project managers, regardless of their use of specialty consultants, should own the public involvement process, making sure the public is engaged in meaningful ways at strategic points in the project, and that their feedback is integrated into critical project decision-making.

Team members should be accountable for how they listen to, understand, and in creative ways, respond to public input. The team must also determine ways in which they can close the loop with the public, making sure that stakeholders see the value of their involvement in project outcomes.

This is not about endless process – just the opposite. Be clear from the start that good decisions are intended to lead to a project, and that there are expectations about its schedule.

Certainly, involving the public in project decision-making carries a certain amount of risk. You may ask: Do we have the right people involved? Do they represent the will of all stakeholders? Can we find a common way ahead for the project? Having a less participatory process does not eliminate the risk. It pushes it to the end of the project, or worse, to the next project.

By thinking critically about public involvement, setting reasonable goals, and determining involvement targets, communities get the right stakeholders to the table and use a variety of techniques to gather and respond to public feedback. ■■

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## Tips to getting there

The following guidelines can add increased value to public involvement processes and ensure success on your next project:

- Sell the problem, not the solution. Citizens become much more engaged in public involvement processes when there is a clear understanding of need.
- After stating the problem, focus dialogue around values and outcomes. Your ability to satisfy community and stakeholder values will determine whether you have a supportive or unsupportive public. Values are non-negotiable, and helping to satisfy them builds support for your effort. Having a partnership mentality will facilitate public discussion of how to add value to a project.
- Set clear boundaries. The public understands boundaries, as most citizens manage a budget and are familiar with managing projects at home and/or work. What does the public have influence over? What is on the table? What is off the table? Answering these three questions up front will minimize unrealistic expectations, and the public will appreciate it.
- Think strategically about scheduling public involvement. Avoid July and August, as well as Thanksgiving through January 1.
- Break away from traditional public forums. Not everyone will speak up at a public meeting, so it is important to incorporate other ways for citizens to share their input.
- Involve schools in the process. Students are the next generation of building users. They can provide valuable input into the value of a proposed public design.
- Take a long view. You cannot treat the public as peers if you are narrow sighted. If you are not thinking strategically, you are acting tactically.