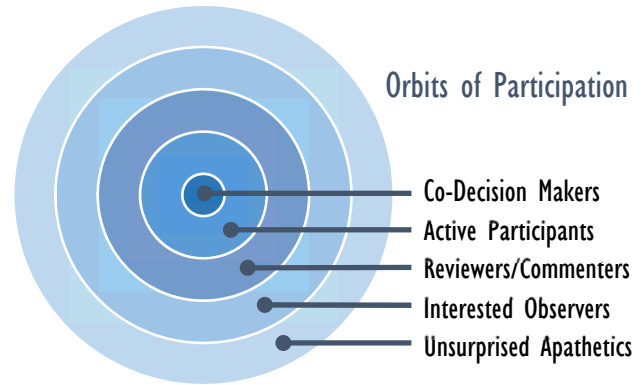


Orbits Of Participation

Public participation does not require everybody to participate. This is unrealistic, given resource constraints and the lack of desire on the part of many stakeholders to be actively involved. Despite your best efforts to involve citizens, some will choose not to participate. Others will participate at different levels depending upon their level of interest, concern or availability. You can think of these levels as “orbits of participation.” Throughout the course of a planning process, a person can move from one level of participation to a more active level, but it requires a greater investment of time, resources and energy. Individuals at different levels or “orbits” of participation have been described as follows:



Unsurprised Apathetics are those who choose not to participate. They may be too busy at work or very active in some other aspect of community life, but have little interest in your issue. The qualifier ‘unsurprised’ means that you have made efforts to provide them with information so that they are unsurprised or uninterested when a decision is made. What distinguishes them from people completely outside of the public participation realm (the ‘uninformed’) is that they have made the choice not to participate.

Interested Observers are people who read newspaper articles or public informational documents about the process. Unless they become very concerned with what they see going on, you will not hear from them. They are nonetheless an important part of public opinion. If they grow concerned about the direction that things are going or if the project loses its transparency, they may choose to become active participants.

Commenters and Reviewers are very interested in the issue but also have to deal with all the other things going on in their lives. They might comment by speaking at a meeting or sending a letter, but won’t take the time to participate in an advisory group. This group also includes members of local departments and agencies who serve as technical reviewers. Their involvement may be limited, but it is nonetheless important.

Active Participants are the people who commit time and energy to have an influence on a decision. They may participate in an advisory group, attend workshops or meetings, or engage in other ways. They care about the issue, and it is in your best interest to channel their energy and commitment into the public participation program. If you leave an active participant out of the public participation process, they may show up late and undercut what you’ve done, or they may make themselves heard in another fashion, such as through a political channel or in the courtroom.

Co-Decision Makers are those who make the final decision or have veto power over a decision. Co-decision makers often include members of the plan commission, governing body, neighboring communities, funding agencies, and higher levels of government. In situations where the plan commission makes a recommendation to the governing body, it is very important to keep the governing body informed throughout the process so that they understand and buy-in to the final decision.