

# Enticements Needed to Woo the Public

by Elaine Cogan

How many times are you expected to attend meetings at 7 or 7:30 in the morning or 6 in the evening where the only food is luke-warm coffee and perhaps a stale cookie? Does that affect your attention span? Your attitude toward the hosts and perhaps even the subject?

Put yourself in the shoes of the public who have many demands on their time. Although you know how important planning meetings may be, people may not put such invitations anywhere near the top of their to-do lists.

The exceptions, of course, are when you take up issues that directly affect a portion of the population. In those situations, the planning board is likely to be holding a formal session at a set time and people will make an effort to attend to express their self-interest. It is when there is not a crisis or burning issue that you should create opportunities to leave the confines of your commission board rooms to meet informally with people. At those times, it is especially important to give attention to those amenities that will entice people to attend.

Some planners think they are likely to attract busy citizens such as working people and older residents if they schedule meetings or workshops early in the evening. Six or six-thirty may indeed be convenient for some hard-to-reach people, but it is also dinner time. It is an insult to expect only stale cookies and a beverage to suffice. People are friendlier, to their fellow citizens and the conveners, if their stomachs aren't grumbling.

The value of food as a way of creating a convivial environment cannot be overemphasized, and should be an expense built into your annual budget.

1 Before making such arrangements, or with sponsorships (as discussed in the next paragraph), check first with your municipal attorney to make sure you do not run afoul of any conflict-of-interest provisions.

Food is not called for at every regular meeting. But when you are holding a workshop, or trying to draw people to attend a meeting on an important issue such as the comprehensive plan, have refreshments – and indicate this in your meeting announcement.

While no one expects a catered gourmet meal, it is not unreasonable to want to be fed something, and there are inexpensive ways to meet this need. Everyone likes pizza or sandwiches. Local restaurants often will be happy to provide their specialties at a reduced price if you give them recognition.<sup>1</sup> Substitute cold punch for canned and bottled pop and you can save even more money.

In addition to food, there are many other ways to reach out to the public.

*Enlist partners.* This is especially important if you are trying to interest people who may be generally distrustful of government. Seek out their acknowl-

edged leaders and ask them to sponsor or co-sponsor your meeting. This gives you the credibility and access to a segment of the population you probably could not attain on your own.

*Go where the people are at a time most convenient for them.* Your community partners should be your guide. Hold your meeting in the senior center, school, church, or other acknowledged meeting place where the people feel most comfortable and when they are most likely to come. Mealtime? Provide food as noted above.

*Offer additional amenities such as bus passes or child care.* Not everyone has a car, can afford public transportation, or is able to pay a sitter in order to attend a public meeting. Ask your local transit agency to donate some passes or pay for them yourselves. Offer free child care and people may consider this a “night out.” Even if they have to bring their children with them, they can be assured they will not be underfoot. Make use of a licensed daycare provider, or enlist reliable teenagers (through the scouts or a service club) who may want to earn some extra money. Of course, double-check to be sure there are no liability concerns.

It should be no surprise that planning issues alone may not entice a big audience. Yet, by thinking creatively about what works to draw people out in your community you can significantly boost turnout and public participation. ♦

Elaine Cogan, principal in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, LLC, is a consultant to many communities undertaking strategic planning or visioning processes. Her “Effective Planning

Commissioner” column regularly appears in the *Planning Commissioners Journal*.



## Online Comments

“As a parent I place a lot of importance on the evening meal, typically the only meal of the day where all of us are in attendance. Scheduling a lot of ‘dinnertime’ meetings may be convenient for some folks, but it can also be disruptive for families. One technique I’ve seen used is to schedule an ‘open house’ type meeting for a 5 to 8 pm time frame. This allows people to come and go to better fit their schedules. This obviously doesn’t work with a public hearing format.”

– Kent E. Holm, Director, Douglas County Environmental Services, Omaha, NE

“We held a community visioning session as a kick-off to our Master Plan Update project. About 125 people attended the session, which is a great turnout for our community. The key factor behind the turnout was that we served a Friday night supper and Saturday breakfast and lunch.”

– Ross Moldoff, AICP, Planning Director, Town of Salem, NH