# Organizing a Citizen Advisory Group

## Issues

To organize a Citizens Advisory Group requires, as a first step, to define the issue (s) to be addressed.

Is a Citizen Group appropriate for this issue? Keep in mind that:

- Citizen Groups are usually made up of a small group of community volunteers representing a range of points of view and areas of expertise.
- Citizen Advisory Groups can become a helpful link back to the community that they represent.
- A Citizen Group may not be perceived as adequately representing the broader public, or residents affected by a proposal.
- Depending upon the time frame given to the Group, costs can become considerable and the process can place a strain on staff resources.

## Define the Roll for the Group

Consider the following options in defining an overall role for a Citizen Group:

- Measuring the opinions of special populations
- Sounding Board (providing general reactions and opinions)
- Independent technical review body
- Group asked to recommend change on existing policies or procedures
- Decision-making, managing group
- Watchdog group, ensuring accountability and transparency on the part of municipal decision-makers

# Select Group Members

The broader audience being represented by the Group will depend on the particular issue being addressed, and could include any of the following:

- All members of the public
- Residents in a specific geographic area affected by a particular proposal
- Special interest groups affected by a particular proposal
- Groups or communities traditionally underserved by planning

To a large extent, the Group will be judged by the composition of its membership. Consider the following methods for selecting a balanced and credible group of Group members:

- Direct appointment by the municipality
- Direct appointment by a neutral third party
- Election by members of the public at a public meeting
- Appointments by the municipality based on nominations received from the public
- Ensure that the Group has equal representation of women and men as well as the diversity of the municipality's residents
- Consider preparing a checklist of selection criteria to be used when appointing or seeking nominations for Group members:

# Resource People

Select and Train Staff: Staff training will depend on the level of Staff involvement defined by the Group, and could involve the following:

- Basic orientation on the role of the Group is appropriate where the Group is composed entirely of residents.
- A more comprehensive orientation session is appropriate where a staff member is selected to serve as Chair or Group member.

# The Meeting

## Prepare information for the Group's first meeting

Keep in mind that the Group may need background and technical information such as:

- Purpose of the project/proposal
- Main issues related to the project/proposal
- Disaggregated information by gender, race, age, income, status, etc. to show how the situation affects women and men differently
- Members of the study team
- Any relevant evaluation criteria being used by the municipality
- Proposed steps in the process of public participation
- The Group's role in the process
- Alternative options being considered in the process

## Define an Agenda for the First Meeting

Consider including some of the following items in the agenda for a first meeting:

- Selection of a chairperson from among the Group's members
- Definition of a voting procedure
- Clarification of the Group's terms of reference
- Definition of role to be played by agency staff
- Policy on confidentiality of material provided to the group
- Policy on funding for expenses incurred by Group members
- Schedule of subsequent meetings.

## Follow-up Activities

Several options can be considered once a Group meeting has taken place:

- Minutes of the meetings can be used to prepare reports for staff
- Information Publications can be used to keep the public up-to-date on the Group's progress
- Particular attention should be paid to providing the general public with opportunities to review and evaluate any recommendations provided by the Group

# Establish the Overall Time Frame

In preparing a work plan, keep in mind the following steps. Consider providing an estimate of days or weeks next to each step:

- Initial preparatory work _____
- Member selection process _____
- Confirmation of members _____
- Information for first meeting _____
- Additional staff training time _____
- Support for first meeting _____
- Follow-up time _____

Adapted from: Federation of Canadian Municipalities (1999). "Organizing a Citizen Advisory Group." *Local Government Participatory Practices Manual.*

## Prepare a Budget

Consider the following costs:

- Notifying the public

- Holding a Public Meeting

- Information / presentation production costs (multiplied by the number of meetings)

- Member's expenses (multiplied by the number of meetings)

- Facilities (multiplied by the number of meetings)

- Follow-up report production costs

- Follow-up advertising to public

- Costs associated with extensions in the Group's mandate

List expected costs:

## Identify Funding

Consider a range of mechanisms for funding these costs:

- Departmental funding

- Municipal funding outside department

- In-kind contributions (volunteer time, facility space)

- Sponsorship/cash donations

- Funding from senior levels of government

- International sources of funding

- Other