

Tools of Engagement:



Encouraging, Considering, and Responding to Public Comment in the New DNRE

June 2010

DNRE Management Regions





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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“[I]t would be nice if they really listened and used our input, rather than saying they will and don’t. We are smarter than you give us credit for.”¹

“Never really occurred to me that my opinion would be of interest to anyone else.”

“Staff’s time and patience in helping to bring knowledge and awareness is a major key for the environmental future of our State.”

As employees working for a public agency we are continually asked to do more with less at a time when citizen expectations are on the rise for the protection of Michigan’s natural resources and environment. Without a doubt the new DNRE’s budget will tighten year by year, as did the budgets of the former DNR and DEQ. Despite less funding, there is ever-increasing public scrutiny of how we serve the public and fulfill our mission. Calls for transparency will likely get louder, but the DNRE need not face such calls with fear or uncertainty. Public interest in what we do is a good, even great, thing. This guidebook is intended to encourage DNRE staff to make the most of citizen interest in the important work that we do by providing meaningful and effective “Tools of Engagement.”

Public participation empowers citizens² to have an impact on their natural resources and environment by voicing their opinion and observing positive outcomes. Those positive outcomes in turn lead to increased support for DNRE programs and the natural resources and environment that we all strive to protect. The public participation process is an active, continuous, working relationship between the public, stakeholders and DNRE facilitators. As facilitators of this process, we not only need technical knowledge of the issues, but strong interpersonal communication skills and empathy for the differing viewpoints offered by Michigan’s diverse citizenry.

In an article titled, “Washington Goes to Mr. Smith: The Changing Role of Citizens in Policy Development,”³ Matt Leighninger, Executive Director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium identifies five goals for improved citizen engagement. We suggest these goals translate well to the mission of the DNRE:

- 1. Gather policy input from a broad cross-section of citizens.*
- 2. Defuse tension and conflict around particular public decisions.*

¹ At the beginning of each chapter of this Guidebook, direct quotes from the Public and Staff surveys are shared.

² Throughout the Guidebook, “public” and “citizen” are used to describe individuals and organizations interested in and affected by DNRE programs and decisions. These terms broadly encompass not only individuals, but also advocacy groups, local elected officials, business interests, and others with whom the agency interacts.

³ Intergovernmental Solutions Newsletter, Fall 2009: http://www.usaservices.gov/events_news/newsletters.php with portions of the essay adapted from Mr. Leighninger’s book, *The Next Form of Democracy* (Vanderbilt University Press).

3. *Rebuild public trust and help citizens understand how difficult the role of government can be.*
4. *Gain a better understanding of the language and ideas [the DNRE] needs to use in order to reach even larger numbers of people.*
5. *Encourage citizens to take actions that support and complement public policies.*

It is easy to find reasons for not focusing more on citizen engagement. Lack of time, staff shortages, inadequate funding, and the inability to collect constructive comments are all examples of issues that we each face. Yet if we shift our perspective on public participation from being a necessary evil to an opportunity to truly engage with the public and shine a light on our hard work, then the wise investment of time and energy will pay dividends. Effective citizen engagement improves a community's knowledge of important environmental and natural resources issues, increases the credibility of DNRE decisions, clarifies the role of the government and its people, creates and defines relationships for the future, and improves everyone's understanding of expectations and stakeholder needs.

In late 2009 external (Public) and internal (Staff) surveys were developed by then DEQ and DNR staff in order to provide insight into both past practices and future expectations with regard to public participation. With participation from nearly 1,500 members of the public (representing each county of the state) and 1,000 DNRE staff members (evenly split between former DNR and DEQ staff), the survey results provided a wealth of information to guide the development of necessary and useful tools for enhancing citizen engagement in the new DNRE. The complete survey results are contained in a supplemental report to this Guidebook.

Survey outcomes were further refined by interviewing DNRE Executive Division staff, stakeholders, and additional DNRE staff with wide-ranging public participation experience.

Two compelling issues emerged from the Public Survey. First, 660 individuals identified themselves as dissatisfied by past opportunities to provide comment to the DEQ or DNR. While roughly half of respondents are apparently satisfied, our public is clearly interested in improved dialogue on DNRE issues important to them. Second, 63% of respondents who have never shared comments on an issue with the former DNR or DEQ have refrained from doing so because *they did not think that their opinions would make a difference.*

What citizens think of the new DNRE is something that we will see every day in newspapers large and small, as we travel throughout Michigan for our work, and in our personal lives as we interact with our own neighbors. What citizens think is reflected every year as the Legislature debates funding for our programs. Service to the public does matter and the tools set forth in this guidebook are intended to help us build relationships with citizens that protect Michigan's resources both now and into the future. The DNRE encompasses a large universe of programs and is comprised of a vibrant and diverse group of natural resources professionals, environmental analysts, and historians. What follows is a broad brushstroke of concepts and ideas that can be tailored to suit specific programs, issues, and people throughout the DNRE.

CHAPTER 2

ENCOURAGING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

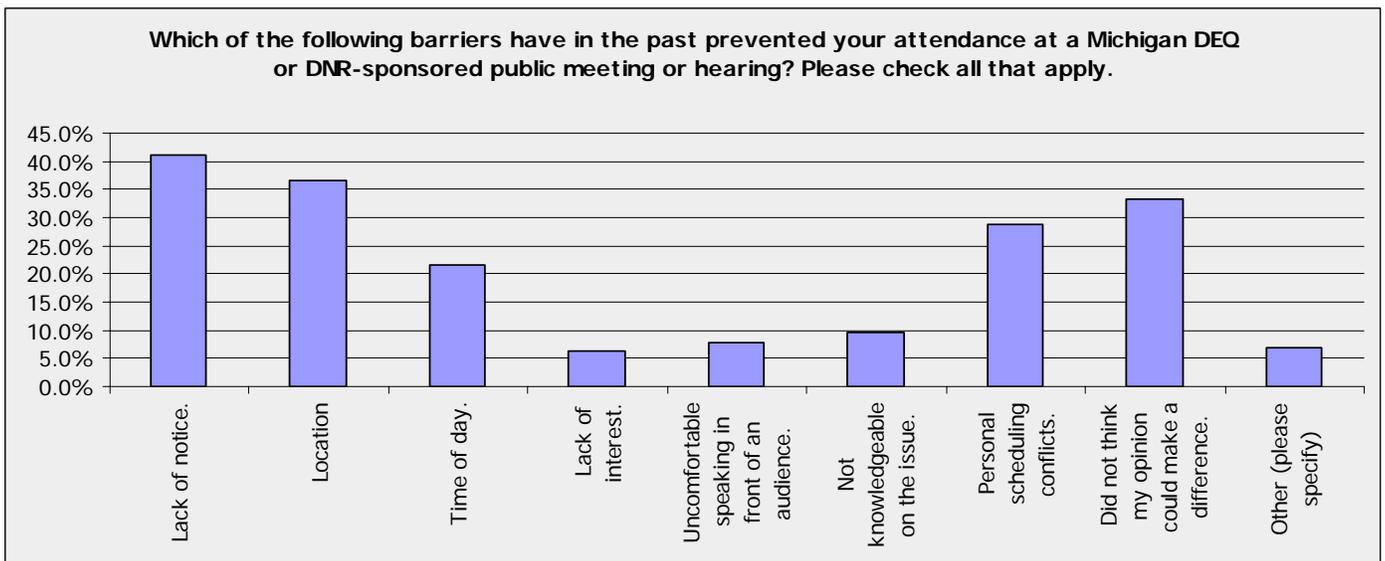
“I didn't know the DEQ or DNR held public meetings and hearings.”

“The times they choose are always during the week when people are at work or just got off work making it impossible to make a meeting that's 40 minutes away”

“Neither Department has been nearly aggressive enough in engaging the public and needs to find much more effective ways of reaching out to its constituents.”

In the Public Survey, 63% of respondents indicated that they had not shared comments with the DNR/DEQ in the past because they did not think their opinion would make a difference. Effective decision making cannot occur without public participation. In this chapter we will examine common barriers to public participation at public hearings and meetings and how to effectively minimize those issues to encourage greater participation from all stakeholders.

One of the questions posed in the Public Survey was “Which of the following barriers have in the past prevented your attendance at a Michigan DEQ or DNR sponsored public meeting or hearing?” Of the nine possible responses available to the 1056 people that answered this question, the top three options selected were “Lack of Notice”, “Location” and “Did Not Think My Opinion Could Make a Difference.” It should be noted that the respondents could select more than just one option when responding to this question.



Working through the public’s perceived barriers to participation is critical for the DNRE to actively engage with its constituents and develop greater understanding between DNRE program staff and affected stakeholders. In addition to a compilation of common “Do’s” and “Don’ts” related to encouraging public participation, this chapter also includes a table for assessing what

kind of public participation process best suits a given issue. Both tools should assist staff in removing barriers in order to increase public participation. Finally, the article “Planning for Citizen Engagement” sets forth a long-range process for collaborating with the public.

INSIDE THIS CHAPTER:

- I. Encouraging Public Participation Do’s & Don’ts
- II. Checklist for Evaluating the Best Method(s) of Communication on a DNRE Public Comment Opportunity
- III. Planning for Citizen Engagement

RELATED TEMPLATES & SAMPLES IN THE APPENDIX:

- Targeted Mailing: T-1, S-1 & S-2
- Press Release: T-2 & T-3, S-3 & S-4
- Post Card: T-4 & T-5, S-6 & S-7
- Mass Mailing: T-6, S-8
- Mass Electronic Mail: S-9
- Notice of Public Hearing: T-7, S-10
- Notice of Public Meeting: T-8, S-11
- Notice of Compartment Reviews: S-5
- Notice of Open House: S-18

ENCOURAGING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION DO'S & DON'TS

Survey outcomes and interviews with DNRE staff and management identified a number of tips to assist in communicating DNRE public participation opportunities - regardless of perceived importance - in a manner that encourages the development of positive, thoughtful relationships with our citizens and other affected persons. While some of these tips might seem obvious, it is often the most common sense actions that are forgotten when we all have “too much to do”:

DO:

- + Know the legal requirements, if applicable, that are associated with the public participation opportunity. Requirements vary among DNRE programs.
- + Provide significant advance notice of public comment periods, meetings, and hearings. Because the citizens that we wish to engage are volunteering their time and energy, we need to provide plenty of notice for them to adjust schedules, arrange for child care (if needed), and organize their thoughts on the subject.
- + Notify grassroots organizations, websites, and publications that are already engaged in the issue for which public comment or participation is sought (Example: For hunting/fishing issues, notify Outdoor Sportsman.com).
- + Provide notice to the public via multiple outlets (i.e., newspaper, TV, social networking sites, list-servers, direct mailings, DNRE website). Citizens cannot be engaged unless they are made aware of the opportunity to participate. Consider contacting “Local Leaders⁴” in a community to both inform them of the DNRE’s interest in public involvement and gather input on an effective strategy for communicating with interested persons and groups in their specific community.
- + Provide detailed information pertaining to the issue for which comment is being sought, including the various methods by which comments may be shared (e-mail, standard mail, in person). If the time allotted for meeting participants to speak may be limited, advise the public of that potential in the notice.
- + Hold gatherings at locations close to the citizens from whom input is sought. Long travel times can greatly reduce the number of citizens willing or able to attend a meeting or hearing.

⁴ A 2006 Leadership Academy project on public participation defined Local Leaders as individuals from governmental agencies, citizen organizations, or interest groups that are highly involved in local issues. Local units of government can also often provide invaluable information pertaining to the needs and wants of its citizens.

- + Provide dates and times tailored to meet the availability of the citizens from whom input is sought, rather than the DNRE's traditional business hours. Inconvenient meeting times can have the same impact as not having a meeting at all.

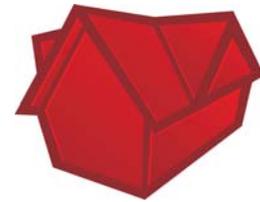
DO NOT:

- Assume that the citizens you wish to engage already have knowledge of the issue at hand. The public notice may be the first time many have heard of the issue.
- Exclude any group of interested citizens. All points of view provide benefit to the meeting or hearing.
- Change the meeting date or location after the original notice is made, unless absolutely necessary. Once a person has made arrangements to attend the meeting as proposed, it can be quite difficult if not impossible for them to change their plans. This could lead to lower participation and greater frustration from the public.
- Avoid or ignore new methods for communicating in favor of the status quo. As technology advances, different and exciting ways to encourage public participation are continuously being developed.

**EVALUATING THE BEST METHOD(S) FOR ENCOURAGING PUBLIC INTEREST IN A DNRE
PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITY:**

A CHECKLIST FOR STAFF

- ✓ Who is your audience? Is the DNRE decision or opinion one likely to affect the general public, a narrow interest group or business, one community, or the entire state?
- ✓ Are the numbers of people and groups interested in the decision very large (i.e. too numerous for a personal communication)?
- ✓ What kind of contact information is readily available for potentially-interested persons and groups? Consider seeking information from existing organizations that maintain membership lists, local units of government, or other groups within a community.
- ✓ Has local print media or television/radio stations previously shown interest in this issue?
- ✓ Is the DNRE decision or opinion likely to be controversial?
- ✓ Be aware of any legal requirements related to the type or timing of public notice. Many environmental programs have unique requirements which may set a minimum levels of activity.



| <u>STATEWIDE INTEREST:</u> | <u>REGIONAL INTEREST:</u> | <u>LOCAL INTEREST:</u> |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Statewide press release ✓ Facebook and/or Twitter announcements ✓ DNRE website with front page placement ✓ Educational video(s) ✓ Potential radio or TV interviews in major markets (i.e. Michigan Radio) ✓ Mass Mailings or e-mail ✓ Specific contact with major newspapers or issue-oriented magazines. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Targeted press release ✓ DNRE website posting ✓ Communication with Regional Director & Citizen Advisory Council members ✓ Potential regional radio or TV interviews ✓ Targeted e-mail with development of a distribution list ✓ Specific contact with regional newspapers or magazines. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ DNRE website posting ✓ Telephone contact with local unit of government or related local organization ✓ Targeted e-mail with development of a distribution list ✓ Targeted mailings ✓ Targeted phone calls ✓ Specific contact with local newspapers, magazines, etc. |

The following article summarizes why public participation is a critical component of the DNRE's day-to-day efforts to protect and conserve Michigan's natural (and cultural) resources and environment and lays a foundation for the development of a Citizen Engagement Plan for collaborative interaction with citizens interested in DNRE activities.

Planning for Citizen Engagement⁵

By Kathryn J. Brasier
Assistant Professor of Rural Sociology
Pennsylvania State University

Local governments, community organizations, and public agencies make better decisions and have a greater impact when they increase the frequency, diversity, and level of citizen engagement. Citizens are engaged when they play an effective role in decision-making. They are actively involved in defining the issues, identifying solutions, and developing priorities. Here, we summarize strategies that:

- Increase citizens' knowledge
- Encourage citizens to apply that knowledge
- Create opportunities for citizens to engage each other and
- Ensure opportunities are ongoing.

Why Engage Citizens?

It's the right thing to do: Citizen engagement supports principles of a democratic system, including equal opportunity to influence public decision-making and popular sovereignty. It supports the ethic that all those affected by a decision should have a say in that decision.

It works: Citizen engagement creates more effective solutions. Participatory processes enhance legitimacy of solutions and decrease conflict.

It creates other benefits: Engagement improves citizens' knowledge, communication, and problem-solving skills. Participants who have traditionally been marginalized can become empowered. Trust in community organizations and governmental agencies can increase.

What are Basic Principles of Citizen Engagement?

Effective engagement results from a high-quality process. Principles of successful citizen-engagement activities include:

⁵ Reproduced with the author's permission. Originally appearing in the Intergovernmental Solutions Newsletter, Fall 2009: http://www.usaservices.gov/events_news/newsletters.php Funding support for Professor Brasier's research was provided by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. A copy of the full report is available at the Center's website (<http://www.ruralpa.org>). University Park, PA 16802.

- **Diversity:** Seek participants who represent multiple viewpoints, ideas, resources, and social networks;
- **Inclusivity:** Reduce barriers to participation, including knowledge, experiences, and cultural differences;
- **Equality:** Ensure equal participation and influence in the process;
- **Transparency:** Communicate the work of the group clearly, both internally and externally;
- **Legitimacy:** Justify all decisions, and show how participants' input affected the decisions;
- **Deliberation:** Provide opportunities to share ideas and values, discuss them, and come to agreement as a group;
- **Substance:** Create opportunities to learn and apply that knowledge;
- **Influence:** Ensure the outcome influences decision-making;
- **Ongoing:** Create opportunities at all stages of the decision-making process, and allow time for reflection;
- **Accommodation:** Provide opportunities to participate at multiple times and locations.

Developing a Citizen Engagement Plan

A citizen engagement plan will identify why citizen engagement is necessary, what you hope to achieve, and the processes you will use. First, identify the goal: What do you want to learn or change? Are you prepared to act on the results? Do you have the necessary time and resources? To start, assemble a planning team to represent all stakeholders. The team will identify goals, select appropriate techniques, recruit participants, and publicize the project.

Step 1: Define the Issue: Frame the problem as an issue for discussion. This shapes perceptions of the issue and the range of solutions. The frame should set a neutral tone and identify a feasible scope of action. For example, frame the problem of "latch-key kids" as "opportunities for youth."

Step 2: Identify the Purpose of Engagement: Why do people need to be involved, and to what extent? There is a continuum of possibilities:

- To inform means to provide citizens and decision-makers with information.
- To consult is to get feedback or stimulate public debate.
- To engage means incorporating citizens' views in the decision-making process.
- To collaborate involves creating long-term partnerships of citizens and officials to address the issue.

Step 3: Identify Tools for Engagement: The purpose of engagement will guide the choice of tools.

- *Tools to inform* include interviews, surveys, and public hearings. These tools describe demographic characteristics; assess priorities; describe opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors; assess policy support; evaluate existing programs and identify gaps in services; and provide a platform to express opinions.

- *Tools to consult* include nominal group processes (i.e., listening sessions), Delphi techniques⁶, and focus groups. These techniques generate prioritized lists of issues, problems, or opportunities, and can initiate discussion of issues.
- *Tools to engage* include public issues forums, citizens' panels, and design workshops, and result in recommendations for policymakers. These processes provide citizens with multiple perspectives and time for interaction and reflection.
- *Tools to collaborate* include study circles and community task forces, and produce prioritized goals and action steps. Collaboration involves enhanced, repeated interaction among participants.

Step 4: Identify Potential Participants: All those who can affect or who may be affected by a decision should be invited. Effective recruiting brings diverse ideas, skills, and experiences that enhance discussions. Recruit from both established groups (leaders, officials, organizations) and from groups often overlooked (minorities, women, youth, newcomers, low-income individuals, etc.). Invite those who have disagreed in the past, as they have demonstrated concern. Identify barriers to participation (i.e., language, knowledge, location, cultural differences) and remove them.

Step 5: Develop a Recruitment and Retention Plan: A formal plan targets participants and identifies contact methods. The recruitment plan should also identify retention strategies that support participants' growth and reward their efforts.

Step 6: Create a Positive Environment: Create an environment in which participants' time is used effectively. Ensure that meetings are productive and comfortable for participants, and communicate clearly about objectives and action steps. Most importantly, follow up with action.

Step 7: Identify Evaluation Criteria: Establish benchmarks, and continually evaluate progress toward the group's goals. Be sure to celebrate successes.

Step 8: Maintain Lines of Communication: Provide ongoing opportunities to participate and be informed. This could entail periodic publications (e.g., newsletters), a website, as well as special activities (celebrations, family events, etc.). Develop a plan for working with local media.

Conclusion

A more engaged citizenry leads to better decisions, more efficient resource allocation, and reduced conflict. However, getting all the pieces in place can be daunting and take considerable resources. The suggestions included here provide a starting point for enhancing your citizen engagement efforts.

⁶ The Delphi Technique is a process by which you use multiple rounds of surveys to move from general ideas toward a more specific set of ideas or recommendations. The technique generates and prioritizes ideas by giving participants a chance to first give their ideas and then react to the ideas of all the other participants in the process.

CHAPTER 3

CONDUCTING HEARINGS & MEETINGS

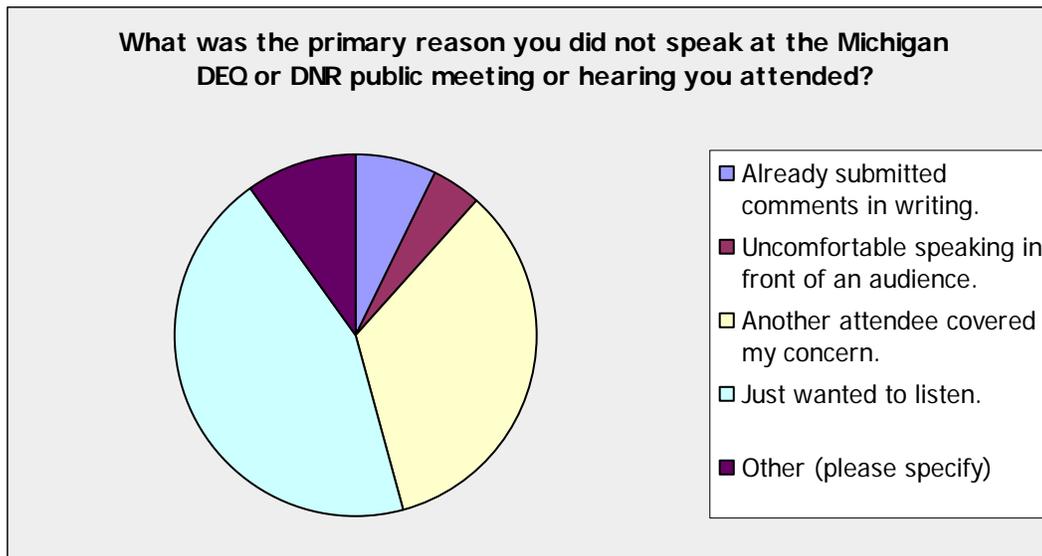
“It does not seem like anyone listens. Decisions are already made.”

“It is never explained that there HAS to be a legal basis to deny a permit, otherwise the Dept. has no choice but to issue it, no matter how many ‘upset’ people show up at a hearing. That fact is never adequately communicated.”

“Staff comes across that they are providing public comment because of a statutory need or administrative necessity without any genuine interest in the information received.”

In the Staff Survey, 42% of respondents indicated that they had no prior experience in facilitating a public meeting or hearing. In order to assist DNRE staff that may be involved in the public participation process for the first time, or as a reminder of the basics for the veteran staff, this chapter contains checklists and tips for arranging a successful public event. While the content is generalized, the principles set forth should serve to assist staff over a broad spectrum of controversial issues that range from small meetings to large hearings.

Of Public Survey respondents, 30% had previously attended a DEQ or DNR-sponsored public meeting or hearing. In an effort to learn if those respondents were *active* participants at the meeting, they were then asked whether or not they spoke to the group. Forty-one percent elected not to speak and, when asked why, a majority responded that they just wanted to listen.



This insight that many citizens just to listen presents a great opportunity for staff to use public meetings and hearings as a vehicle for educating citizens on an issue they are clearly interested

in. Being well-prepared with both meeting/hearing logistics and content is critical and the tools in this chapter will assist staff in succeeding on both fronts.

INSIDE THIS CHAPTER:

- I. Tool for Determining the Best Format for a Successful Public Gathering
- II. Do's & Don'ts for Effective Public Meetings & Hearings
- III. The ABC's of Planning a Good Public Meeting or Hearing

RELATED TEMPLATES & SAMPLES IN THE APPENDIX:

- Press Release: T-2 & T-3, S-3 & S-4
- Americans with Disabilities Act Checklist: S-12
- Fact Sheets: S-13 through S-16
- Comment/Attendance card: S-17
- Courtesy Comment Sheet: T-9
- Pre-Hearing Statement: T-10 & T-11
- Public Hearing Agenda: S-19
- Public Meeting Evaluation: S-20
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's): S-21

WHAT KIND OF GATHERING SUITS YOUR ISSUE BEST?⁷

| FORMAL PUBLIC HEARINGS | FORMAL PUBLIC MEETINGS | INFORMAL INFORMATION MEETINGS | COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSIONS |
|---|--|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Must be conducted if required by statute or rule. 2. Department can hold a formal hearing for the record even if not required by rule. 3. Attendance cards or sign-in sheets are used 4. Comments are recorded for the Administrative Record on the action. 5. Public can make oral comments for the record and or submit written comments 6. Hearings officer conducts the gathering. 7. Staff do not respond to comments or questions. 8. Staff can be available in the back or the room for one-on-one informal discussions before or after the formal portion of the hearing. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. May be recorded to maintain comments for inclusion in the Administrative Record. 2. Agency interacts with participants and is able to answer questions. 3. May be held before a public hearing, but is a separate process. 4. Multiple public informational meetings may be conducted based on the nature of the project. 5. Recommended for projects or permits that are complex or controversial. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. May be conducted as an Open House-style forum or with a set agenda. 2. Relaxed setting where the public can come at flexible times (for Open House format) and ask questions of staff. 3. Helpful in collaborative efforts and seeking wide-ranging input. 4. Helpful in building trust and forming relationships. 5. Generally not recorded for inclusion in the Administrative Record. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Often termed a “Workgroup” or “Stakeholder Meeting.” 2. May be by invitation or open to the general public. 3. Looser meeting format and generally does not involve a presentation by DNRE staff. 4. Group has common goals, a purpose, and is seeking a solution to an issue. 5. Group may have a leader or moderator other than DNRE staff. . 6. Citizens who are group members are actively involved in the outcome and have a sense of ownership. |

⁷ Adapted from the Matrix Tool developed within the January 21, 2009, Action Learning Team Report, “Identifying and Testing Effective Public Participation Techniques.”

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public may have the expectation that if enough people speak against it, the department will deny the permit or proposal. • Staff can't speak out or correct misinformation that a person states in during testimony. • The formal nature of the hearing can be intimidating. | <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If public doesn't have the information in advance, may not know what questions to ask. • Sometimes becomes an opportunity to grand-stand rather than ask questions. • Questions may not get answered at the meeting if the right technical staff are not present. | <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be staff intensive • Attendance may vary depending on the location and project • No administrative record is kept, so issues or concerns have to be repeated if a formal hearing is held later. | <p>Disadvantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is often a long term or on-going process. • Can be time intensive for staff • Not suitable for all decision making processes. • Meeting locations and group membership can be controversial |
| <p>Examples: Required public hearings for permits, consent orders, distribution of grant funds, and changes to regulations. Not required by statute but conducted for controversial permits, remediation plans, and other situations where formal comment is sought.</p> | <p>Examples: Meetings to obtain public opinion on resource rules (hunting, fishing, and public land use), or to provide information or answer questions before a required or controversial hearing.</p> | <p>Examples: To provide information or education to the public for upcoming changes to existing rules or guidelines, or for compartment reviews.</p> | <p>Examples: Citizen Advisory Councils (CAC), Citizen Advisory Groups (CAG), Scrap Tire Advisory group, Clean Air Coalitions, Wetlands advisory group, and other media or resource specific groups.</p> |

DO'S & DON'TS FOR CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE PUBLIC MEETINGS & HEARINGS

DO:

- + Identify the best format for the gathering early (using the table above to determine legal requirements and other factors affecting public engagement on a specific topic or issue).
- + Find a meeting space that is larger than what you think you will need. It is better to have too much room than not enough
- + Rely on local knowledge to find the best meeting space for your needs.
- + Consider a geographic location that best serves those directly involved with the issue to be discussed while attempting to avoid specific meeting venues likely to be viewed as “home field” to one set of stakeholders over the others. Be aware of potential situations associated with a venue (for example, other events scheduled at the same date and time).
- + Consider the needs of your attendees. A checklist of considerations related to the Americans with Disabilities Act is included in the Appendix at S-12. Also, be aware of any language barriers that may arise and consider seeking translation assistance.
- + Determine an appropriate date/time for the meeting that will allow maximum participation by interested citizens.
- + Arrive early, set up the meeting and be prepared for early arrival of attendees.
- + Mingle with attendees as they arrive and thank them for coming. This may seem like a small thing, but a welcoming atmosphere goes a long way toward meaningful discussions (not to mention first impressions of the DNRE and its staff).
- + Appoint an appropriate person to lead the meeting. This should be someone who is knowledgeable about the topic, comfortable in front of a crowd and who can think on their feet. Do ask for help if you are not that person!
- + Establish the purpose of the meeting – what it is for and what it is intended to accomplish?
- + Establish and present the “ground rules” at the beginning of the meeting so that everyone understands the protocol governing the particular meeting... and follow them.
- + Be professional and respond to questions/comments in a professional manner.
- + Take the high road in discussions with the public by not engaging in arguments or debates. Maintain a neutral position in discussions with the public, many of whom may be worried about the impacts of the issue under discussion.

- + Be honest with what you know and what you don't know and follow up when you say you will.
- + Provide a variety of methods for the public to participate or provide comments.
- + Try to step into the shoes of a concerned citizen or interest group, anticipate what questions may be asked, and have the right staff present to answer those potential questions.
- + Consider giving a PowerPoint presentation or Question & Answer session at the beginning of a formal hearing to explain specific issues, discuss how a project or proposal fits within broad DNRE interests, and provide a status update on the project.
- + Remain open to new ideas and concepts and remember that we manage/protect the resource for the public. Hear what the public has to say. A common complaint among Public Survey respondents involved Department staff "hearing, but not listening." For some, an opportunity to state an opinion is what matters most and maintaining empathy for those individuals - even when their view conflicts with the opinion or decision of the DNRE - is important.
- + At the end of the meeting or hearing, thank people for coming. Once again, put yourself in the shoes of your audience and imagine the number of things you would have to juggle in your own life to attend the meeting.

DO NOT:

- Rely wholly on an involved interest group to assist in the meeting preparation and arrangements for a DNRE-sponsored event.⁸ In many instances, it is important for the DNRE to remain impartial as issues are discussed. Perception matters!
- Huddle in a corner with other DNRE staff or otherwise avoid interacting with citizens in attendance.
- Get emotional or take comments personally.
- Debate with the public or minimize their opinions.
- Arrive with your "mind made up." Whether through words, tone, or even body language, the public can tell when staff are merely going through the motions of seeking public input.
- Adopt an attitude that "we" are always right and will do things the way that "we" want to do them or otherwise appear that decisions have already been made and citizen input is superfluous.

⁸ Often, DNRE staff or managers may be invited to participate in meetings organized by others, in which case the agency has little- if any- control over location, format, or even content. Be sure to discuss potential attendance at those events with a supervisor or colleague.

THE ABC'S OF PLANNING A GOOD PUBLIC MEETING OR HEARING:

- A.** Determine whether you are tasked with conducting a public hearing, meeting, or something else entirely. Consult the table presented earlier in this chapter to determine the meeting format most suitable for the specific topic or issue.
- For public hearings, which are generally required by law, review the applicable legal requirements and be sure to consult co-workers with experience in conducting public hearings. Some DNRE divisions may have a person specifically assigned to the role of 'Hearings Coordinator.'
 - Consider attending other DNRE public hearings or meetings in order to observe how they are set up and see what does and doesn't work.
 - Tailor the meeting to the issue that is being discussed by consulting with local leaders and attempting to anticipate what the public might expect from agency representatives or wish to learn by attending the gathering.
- B.** Attempt to gauge the number of participants. While some meetings are relatively easy to estimate by extending direct invitations to attendees, others may call for an invitation to any interested individuals who may want to attend. It's important to attempt to estimate the level of interest to ensure that meeting accommodations are appropriately-sized and comfortable for all participants. For larger meetings, it may be necessary to establish a time limit for speakers to assure that everyone has an opportunity to be heard. Once everyone has had the opportunity to speak, time may be available for additional comments.
- C.** Once you have a general idea of the potential number of participants, work with local DNRE staff, local governmental officials, or possibly interest groups to identify an appropriate meeting location. As cost is a factor in all that we do, tapping into local knowledge may help find a low or no-cost meeting space. In addition, relying up on identified Local Leaders early on helps to build a network for disseminating additional information both before and after a gathering. Considerations related to the Americans with Disabilities Act are provide in the Appendix at S-12.
- D.** Consider the possibility of making participation in the meeting available to those that cannot physically attend. Options include a webinar, radio broadcast, PBS broadcast, etc. Discuss this idea with management who may suggest involving one of the DNRE Public Information Officers to assist.
- E.** Depending on the controversial nature of the issue, consider having either uniformed or undercover law enforcement present at the meeting.⁹
- F.** Consider creating a timeline to include the tasks that need to be completed both before the meeting and following the meeting. A detailed timeline that includes

⁹ The vast majority of DNRE interactions with the public do not involve security concerns; however, it is naïve to ignore the plain fact that certain DNRE programs involve topics that citizens feel passionate about. While the goal for all DNRE public gatherings is civil discourse, if DNRE staff feel they or members of the public in attendance may feel threatened or otherwise unsafe, then staff should discuss those concerns with local Law Enforcement Division representatives.

items to be completed, when the items need to be completed and who is assigned to each task can help ensure a well organized and planned out meeting.

- G.** When the date of the meeting or hearing arrives, allow plenty of time for travel and set-up. Make sure staff are in place and ready for attendees one hour before the posted start time for the meeting or hearing. Consider opening the meeting by empowering the public in addition to thanking them for their attendance. An example would be “This is your land (water, etc.) and we manage it for you. Your input is critical to us in how we make our decisions and we thank you for taking time to participate. Please also understand that we have statutory obligations that must be adhered to.”

The list below was prepared in consultation with many DNRE staff who frequently conduct public gatherings and serves as a starting point for materials that should be packed and ready to take to the meeting location.

Good Stuff to Have Handy at Every Meeting or Hearing:

- ✓ Extra copies of any handouts
- ✓ Meeting attendance or comment cards
- ✓ Business cards
- ✓ Extra (blank) nametags
- ✓ Pens
- ✓ Blank paper
- ✓ Scotch tape/Masking tape
- ✓ Sharpie marker
- ✓ Pressure clips
- ✓ Stapler
- ✓ List of local contacts, including phone numbers for the venue’s representative or facility manager
- ✓ Push pins
- ✓ Laser pointer
- ✓ Extension cords
- ✓ Signs to direct attendees to the meeting room.
- ✓ Name placards for front tables.

CHAPTER 4

MANAGE, CONSIDER, & COLLATE RESPONSES

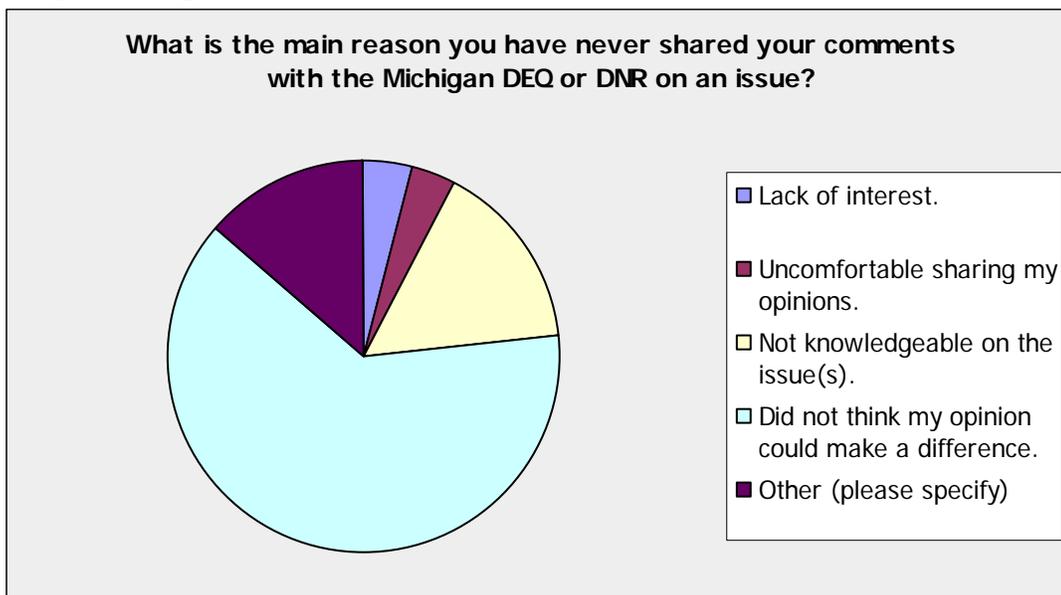
“Often times it seems that we [Staff] may not be very responsive to the questions. We take years to get back on some of the issues raised by stakeholder groups. Sometimes it may appear that we pick and chose what we respond to and how- and it appears very ad hoc.”

“Never received any indication that my message was ever read or considered.”

“Why take comments if they are not acknowledged?”

The public needs to know that their comments were appreciated, evaluated, and considered in the decision-making process. Reviewing and using public input in decision-making, to the extent possible, is critical to increasing citizen engagement in, and support for, DNRE programs. Most people - including DNRE staff - lead busy lives and taking time out of an already jam-packed schedule to provide input on a DNRE issue is something that needs to be treated with respect. People will only be willing to provide input if they believe their comments are considered and will have an impact in the decision-making process.

According to the Public Survey, most people did not comment because they thought their opinions would not make a difference.



If the comments received on an issue are not used, it is important to document why they were not applicable. Explaining how public comments are utilized is an important tool that will assist with building the public’s trust of the DNRE. This is especially true for public hearings where our ability to incorporate public input is limited by statute.

It is also critical for the DNRE to provide multiple ways for the public to provide comments: examples include written, verbal, and electronic methods. Keep in mind that not all citizens have internet access, so multiple options should be made available to all potential participants.

Finally, be sure to accurately summarize the comments that have been received for the decision maker. This is a critical step to ensure that the decision maker is aware of the input that has been received so that it is taken into consideration.

INSIDE THIS CHAPTER:

- I. Managing and Considering Comments Do's and Don'ts
- II. What is a Responsiveness Summary?
- III. What is a Public Hearing Report?

RELATED TEMPLATES & SAMPLES IN THE APPENDIX:

- Responsiveness Summary: T-12
- Public Hearing Report: T-13, S-23
- Public Hearing Recommended Changes: T-14, S-24
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's): S-21
- Public Hearing Record Notice: S-22
- Public Meeting Summary: S-25
- Post card: T-4 & T-5, S-6 & S-7
- Mass mailing: S-8

DO'S & DON'TS FOR MANAGING & CONSIDERING PUBLIC COMMENT

DO:

- + Read and consider each comment that is submitted.
- + Read the comments as they come in. For comments received via e-mail, the simple task of replying to the sender that the message was received goes a long way toward building a positive relationship with that member of the public.
- + Sort the comments by key words, common subjects, or common themes to aid in assuring that all input is evaluated.
- + Carefully summarize similar comments and consider how to make use of the ideas presented in the comments in order to reach a well-thought out decision.
- + Consider whether ideas or questions in the comments trigger the need for more analysis or research of an issue.
- + Seek input from other staff with the proper expertise if the comments include an area or topic that is unfamiliar to you.
- + Consider forming a team to read and summarize the issues when large volumes of comments are submitted.
- + Respond to the public so they know they were heard.
- + Accurately summarize the comments for the decision maker.
- + Document how responses were analyzed and what actions were taken to address the concerns.
- + Develop a responsiveness summary to address all comments received.

DO NOT:

- Wait until the end of the comment period to start reading and analyzing responses.
- Skip over or not address issues that pertain to another program or area.
- Dismiss negative comments.
- Use complex words or acronyms in a responsiveness summary document.
- Respond with sarcasm.
- Take comments on an issue personally.

WHAT IS A RESPONSIVENESS SUMMARY?

It is recommended, especially in high profile or controversial decisions, that a 'response to comment' document be prepared and sent to all interested parties. By creating a database or list of all of the people that provided comments and the contact information for interested parties, such as email addresses, staff can interact with the public throughout the process. A good response to comment document summarizes the issues, describes how and when meetings or hearings were advertised, when meetings or hearings were conducted, how many people attended the meeting, and will provide a response to the comments that were submitted. In addition, a Responsiveness Summary will describe any changes to the document or final decision that were made as a result of the public comment. This document should address all significant verbal and written comments. It is also suggested that a cover letter describing the decision that was reached by the DNRE be sent along with the Responsiveness Summary. The final Responsiveness Summary (or other response to comment document) should also be posted on the department website for easy public access.

WHAT IS A PUBLIC HEARING REPORT?

A Public Hearing Report is a formal accounting of how and why the public hearing and comment period was conducted, provides a discussion of the applicable regulations, and a summary of the public participation and comments. A Public Hearing Report contains the basic elements below, but is tailored to the specific situation.

- Agency Contact – staff contact information
- Background and Purpose – why the hearing was held
- Rule Summary- applicable regulations or policy
- Public Hearing Notice – how the hearing was advertised
- Public Hearing – details of the hearing including date, time, and location
- Agency Staff at the Public Hearing
- Public Hearing Attendees
- Persons Who Submitted Comments – names, titles, and how comments were provided
- Summary of Comments – comments provided and DNRE staff response

A Public Hearing Report can be a critical tool in the public participation and decision-making process within the DNRE. It provides direct insight into public opinion and perception of proposed projects or issues. It also provides an opportunity for DNRE staff involved in the issue to directly respond to concerns and opinions raised by the public. This information is invaluable to DNRE decision-makers and will assist in providing a direct response to public comments and questions.

CHAPTER 5

PROVIDING FEEDBACK

“Just seems like a lot of common sense is not used on key decisions, or lack of fully communicating your info to us so we better understand the decisions you have made.”

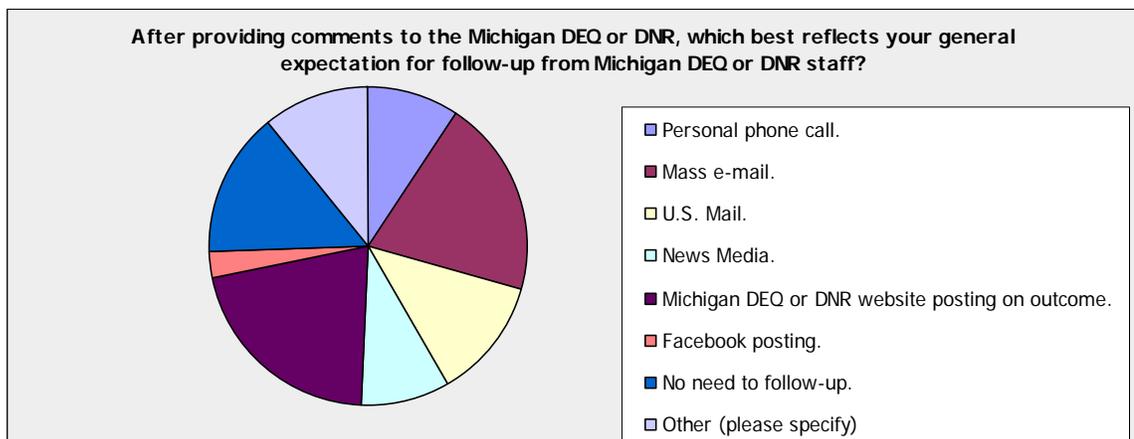
“I do not feel that the feedback received in my experience has been to the extent desirable in many instances. The result of this is that it is difficult to determine what, if any, impact your input may have had or whether it was worthy of consideration.”

“I would just like to get a response when I do send an email or leave a message. I spend a lot of money in the outdoors and should have the respect of the DNRE to get back to me.”

Closing the feedback loop is essential in building the credibility of the DNRE. It offers an opportunity for the DNRE to educate and interact with the public on how and why a decision was made and improves the transparency of our decisions. These opportunities to educate and interact should be seized whenever possible, as the benefits of doing so will last long into the future and will help build trust with the public that we serve.

When given the opportunity to write in additional comments on the Public Survey, a significant number of respondents asked for more outreach from the DNRE, more education on the issues and the reasons behind decisions, as well as more opportunities for direct interaction. The opportunity to make a significant positive impression on the public is there – the DNRE just needs to take advantage of it.

It appears that both citizens and staff are interested in improving the electronic dissemination of information about Department decisions.



While a significant number of individuals indicated a preference for follow-up via Internet tools, it is important to also acknowledge that a number of write-in comments throughout the survey mentioned the lack of Internet access in rural and lower income areas of the state. Despite the appeal of efficiencies made possible through the electronic dissemination of information, it remains important to maintain a broad-based communications platform to reach all citizens affected by DNRE decisions.

To that end, the checklists and referenced templates in this chapter have been prepared to assist staff in developing project-specific outreach related to DNRE decisions. The information provided emphasizes the utilization of Internet tools in order to spur interest in target areas, but also includes information targeted toward those individuals that may lack ready Internet access (i.e. additional outreach to local, traditional news organizations).

In a corresponding question in the Staff Survey, which was directed to DNR and DEQ staff, the Team asked for an identification of the most effective methods for communicating outcomes back to the public. 70.1% of the 371 staff persons replying to the question thought that a posting on the DNRE website would be most effective with an additional 47.2% identifying mass e-mail as the most effective. This appears to mesh well with the public expectations with respect to follow-up activities.

An additional question directed to DNR and DEQ staff specifically asked how outcomes are currently communicated back to the public. Of those that responded, 31.6% indicated that outcomes were not directly communicated back to the public. This statistic is indicative of the need to “close the feedback loop.”

INSIDE THIS CHAPTER:

- I. Closing the Feedback Loop Do's & Don'ts
- II. The Life Cycle of Public Participation

RELATED TEMPLATES & SAMPLES IN THE APPENDIX:

- Press Release: T-2 & T-3, S-3 & S-4
- Post Card: T-4 & T-5, S-6 & S-7
- Mass Mailing: T-6, S-8
- Mass Electronic Mail: S-9

CLOSING THE FEEDBACK LOOP DO'S & DON'TS

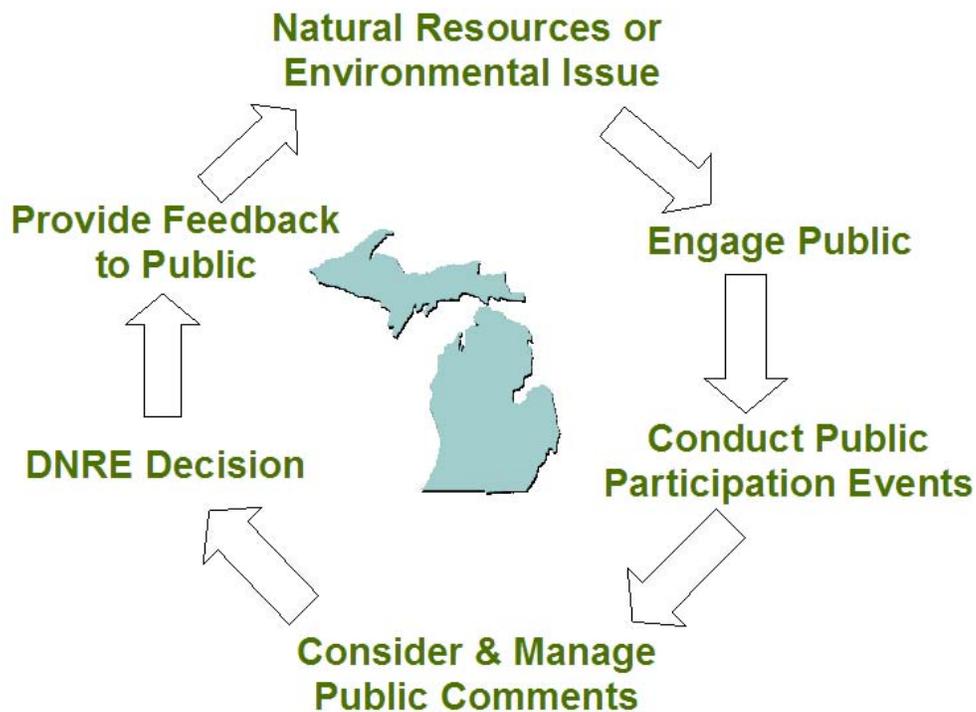
DO:

- + Provide feedback in a timely manner. If a decision on an issue is delayed, consider providing interim updates to concerned citizens.
- + Use the tools from Chapter 2 to provide feedback, i.e. using the same communication strategy that worked to encourage citizens are participate, will likely work to 'close the feedback loop' as well... without having to reinvent the wheel.
- + Know your audience. A decision on a technical issue may need to be broken down more fully into "plain English" when the general public has voiced concerns. However, plain English may not be effective in all areas of the state. Be aware of any need to have materials transcribed into additional languages, for example Spanish or Arabic to accommodate the intended audience.
- + Take the time to communicate an outcome back to the public and interested individuals. This seems simple (especially given what this chapter is about!), but it is not done often enough. The time it takes to do this is well worth the investment.
- + Consider developing a responsiveness summary and utilizing it to communicate a compilation of the comments received and DNRE responses back to those that commented and to the public. This helps to demonstrate that we LISTENED to what was said and that the comments and/or suggestions were considered.
- + Take the time to educate interested individuals that have asked questions or requested clarification. The effort to do this will benefit the DNRE as the public begins to understand the reasoning behind the decisions that are made.
- + For issues that have the potential for high public interest and/or controversy, consider compiling a listserv of the interested individuals. This allows the DNRE to easily communicate the status and decisions to those that are interested.
- + Post the responsiveness summary and relevant documents on the issue and decision on the DNRE website.
- + Utilize relationships developed with Local Leaders to discuss a decision and any corresponding community concerns. A short chat over a cup of coffee or even a quick phone call can at times make a world of difference to people directly affected by DNRE decisions.

DO NOT:

- Do nothing. We serve the public *best* when we tell our citizens what we do and why.
- Assume that the news media knows the news. That is why press releases and other methods of outreach are important. Often media professionals need to be told about interesting stories and encouraged to publicize DNRE events and projects.
- Give up. One poor outcome should not deter future efforts to communicate with the public. A gratifying outcome of the Public Survey was a large number of write-in comments acknowledging that DNRE staff have a tough job. Many even thanked us for doing what we do.
- Forget to research answers to questions received from the public and follow up with them individually, if appropriate. Make an effort to do this as quickly as possible once a request is received. This effort will help to build credibility.
- Disregard an issue outside of your area of expertise. Instead seek out the answers from the appropriate staff.

THE LIFE CYCLE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION



The Life Cycle of Public Participation depicts the natural flow of effective citizen engagement in the DNRE decision-making process. If public participation opportunities are thoughtfully planned, the cycle will flow seamlessly and closing the feedback loop will happen with greater ease. Following the steps described throughout this Guidebook- from engaging the public to conducting a well-run public hearing or meeting to properly managing and considering the comments that are received- should prepare you with appropriate tools and information necessary for providing effective feedback.

Closing the feedback loop in a timely manner with both DNRE stakeholders (including the regulated community) and the general public will go a long way in building trust in DNRE decision-making. Meaningful feedback not only provides the results of a decision to the public, but also offers DNRE staff an opportunity to show the public specifically how their comments were considered and where that input made a difference. It also offers an excellent opportunity for the DNRE to educate the public on how and why we make the decisions that we do. Over time, citizens should become more knowledgeable about the DNRE and its programs, magnifying the quality of public comment with each turn of the cycle.

Following the Life Cycle of Public Participation and the guidance set forth throughout the Tools of Engagement will result increased quantity and quality of public participation in DNRE decision making.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

A more engaged citizenry leads to better decisions, more efficient resource allocation, and reduced conflicts. When the DNRE works cooperatively with the public, productive partnerships are built and trust is enhanced. The public is increasingly interested in being involved in the decisions regarding the natural resources and environment. Therefore, it is essential to encourage public participation, carefully consider their input, and provide timely feedback.

When DNRE staff were asked how the public participation process could be improved, several common themes were expressed:

- More personal distribution of notices through local groups directly to the affected citizens, and follow up actions when warranted by the issue
- Announce in the nearby churches, grocery stores, etc. so that the people specifically affected by the issue are aware of the meeting. Ensure that they know that their participation makes a difference.
- More communication with grassroots organizations located in the community involved in the issue.
- Generally the public is not aware of the details of the DNRE decision-making process. Providing information on how the comment process works to those interested in participating will assist in educating the public and in building trust.
- Explain the requirements and statutes that the DNRE is governed by and how they affect our decision making. Conversely, also explain specifically how the public can make an impact on the decisions that we make.
- Provide an opportunity for comment on the DNRE website for input from the public.
- Keep an open mind and consider the input.
- Assure those that comment that their input was heard and explain how it will be addressed. Many may not like the answers, but at least they will know they were not ignored.

- Ensure timely responses to citizen inquiries, transparency, and create an atmosphere of cooperation among the citizens, the regulated community, and the DNRE.
- If appropriate, consider having a meeting or “after action review” to discuss what went right and what went wrong in the public participation process for a specific issue or project.

The Authors¹⁰ hope that this guidebook provides the tools necessary to actively engage the public in meaningful participation for the continued protection of our natural resources and environment. While we received some humorous responses to our survey:

“Went to a deer hunting meeting and you had young girls there representing the DNR that appeared to me you couldn’t tell them anything. They knew it all, and us hunters of 40 plus years knew nothing.”

And examples of the well-known fact that some folks just like to complain:

“END the baiting ban!”

We also received a lot of comments that reflect the dedication, professionalism, and passion that DNRE employees bring to work with them every day:

“You have a tough job. Try to teach the public more and remember that you are the only real defense of our natural resources. Most comments made by the public are only concerned about themselves and what are they going to get. We need long distance thinking and this has to be shown to the public by you.”

“As a former tax assessor, I appreciate the hard work you folk do under often very contentious circumstance. It is not easy to make decisions in that forum. At this time of Thanksgiving, thank you for the sincere and dedicated efforts you make to do your job correctly.”

“Thanks for all your efforts.”

¹⁰ This Guidebook was prepared as part of an “Action Learning Team” project selected by the 2009-10 DNRE Leadership Academy Steering Committee. Team Members are: Susan Kilmer, Tim Melko, Claire Stevens, Jerry Tiernan, Kerry Wieber, and Nicole Zacharda.

CHAPTER 7

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR STAFF

1. External survey of the general public using “Survey Monkey” concerning public participation (Dec 2009 – January 2010).
2. Internal survey of DNR and DEQ staff using “Survey Monkey” concerning public participation (December 2009- January 2010).
3. *Communicating with the Public – Making It Work for You*. Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, Fall 2005.
4. *Stakeholder Involvement & Public Participation at the U.S. EPA – Lessons Learned, Barriers, & Innovative Approaches*. United States Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation. EPA -100-R-00-040. January 2001.
5. *Public Involvement in Environmental Permits*. United States Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response. EPA-500-R-00-007. August 2000.
6. *How to Evaluate Public Involvement*. United States Environmental Protection Agency, Public Involvement Brochures. September 2003.
7. *How to Improve Public Meetings and Hearings*. United States Environmental Protection Agency, Public Involvement Brochures. September 2003.
8. *How to Consult with and Involve the Public*. United States Environmental Protection Agency, Public Involvement Brochures. September 2003.
9. *How to Review and Use Public Input, and Provide Feedback*. United States Environmental Protection Agency, Public Involvement Brochures. September 2003.
10. *A Citizen’s Guide to Participation in Michigan’s Air Pollution Control Program*. Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. April 2007.
11. *Implementation Plan of the Department of Environmental Quality for the Environmental Advisory Council – Recommendations to Improve Public Involvement*. November 2004.

12. *Public Involvement Handbook, A Citizens Guide*. Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.
13. *Identifying and Testing Effective Public Participation Techniques*. 2008 DEQ/MDA/DNR Leadership Academy, Action Learning Team Report. January 21, 2009.
14. *Local Leader Collaboration and Public Involvement Plan – Appendix E*. 2006 DNR/DEQ/MDA Leadership Academy, action learning team final reports, February 6, 2007.
15. Web Site www.regulations.gov.
16. *New Approaches to Public Meetings – Encouraging Civil Discourse and Community Collaboration*. Mary Thompson, Corder/Thompson & Associates
17. *Improving Public Input*. NLN Watershed Watch Article, May 2002.
18. *Guidelines for Conducting Public Hearings*. North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources. April 2001.
19. *Improving Public Participation*. Elizabeth A. Della Vella, Friends of Midcoast Maine. November 2007.
20. *Engaging Citizens In Government*. Intergovernmental Solutions Newsletter, GSA Office of Citizens Services and Communications, Fall 2009.

APPENDIX