2. Involving People Face-to-Face Through Meetings

2.A - Determining the Type of Meeting
2.A.a - Public Meetings/Hearings
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2.A.b - Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses

What are open houses and open forum hearings?

An open house is an informal setting in which people get information about a project. It has no set, formal agenda. Unlike a meeting, no formal discussions and presentations take place, and there are no audience seats. Instead, people get information informally from exhibits and staff and are encouraged to give opinions, comments, and preferences to staff either orally or in writing.

An open forum hearing expands a public hearing to include elements of an open house. In addition, after reviewing exhibits and talking with staff, participants can comment on a proposal for the formal transcript of the public hearing. Open forum hearings require formal notice, even though the hearing itself is informal.

Open houses and open forum hearings have the following common characteristics:

- Information is presented buffet-style, and participants shop for information, including graphics, maps, photos, models, videos, or related documents. Space is allocated for tables or booths, and information is mounted on walls. (See Public Information Materials.)

- Agencies reserve table space for comment sheets where people write their opinions. Participants turn in comment sheets at the time or mail them in later. Pre-paying postage for comment sheets increases the likelihood they will be returned. (See Opinion Surveys.)

- Agency or technical staff people are present to answer questions or provide information. Often at least one person staffs each table, but agency representatives also roam throughout the room.

- These events can be used for either a planning process or project development.

- Since there is no fixed agenda, these events are usually scheduled for substantial portions of a day or evening, so that people can drop in at their convenience. Hours should be clearly set and well-publicized. In areas where people work in shifts, open houses/hearings can be scheduled to overlap the shift changes.
• Brochures or videos introduce the open house/open forum process. (See Video Techniques.)

• Agencies usually provide take-home written materials, brochures, or maps. (See Information Materials.)

• These events can include non-agency displays. Sister agencies and community proponents or opponents may be given space to present a point of view, displays, documents, or handouts in separate, visible areas. Some agencies have found allowing public groups to set up tables outside the meeting or hearing room to public distinguish official agency information from other sources.

In addition to having all the features of an open house, an open forum hearing has the following distinctive characteristics:

• A formal public notice of a fixed time and date must be published.

• People have a chance to clarify individual comments by reviewing materials before putting their opinions "on the record."

• Comments are formally recorded. People can comment orally before a designated staff person or court reporter, or they can write opinions on comment forms at the event and return them prior to the announced deadline. (See Public Surveys.)

• The transcript of comments is made available to interested people after the event.

Why are they useful?

Open houses and open forum hearings provide an informal, casual, and friendly ambience. People drop by at their convenience, get the information that interests them, and stay as long as they wish. Informality encourages participants who are intimidated by formal meetings to attend and give input; often the quality of responses is higher. The short time required for participation attracts people who do not want to sit through long public

Participants have many opportunities for questions and for detailed answers. Conversations between agency staff and participants encourage information exchange, foster courtesy and attentiveness. Question periods have no strict time limits.

Participants have direct interaction with staff who might not otherwise be readily available. Making technical staff available shows an agency is open to community input. It allows for an informal exchange of information, with everyone learning from each other. People can receive immediate responses to questions about issues. Technical staff is available to reduce misinformation and rumor. The New Mexico Department of Transportation includes a local district engineer in its open houses on planning topics to address immediate project concerns. The Arizona DOT used a series of open houses at various locations throughout the State to develop the statewide transportation plan.

The format focuses on issues rather than positions. This focus allows participants to consider strategies to help an agency identify issues and propose solutions. Participants request information and comment on a proposal.

Open houses can be tailored to participants’ specific needs. They are held as necessary to improve public understanding of a process or project. Graphics or other materials prepared to directly address issues of public concern. The California and Nevada DOT joint open house on the I–80 Rail Corridor Study, which included maps and displays and video on potential new rail equipment for operation in the corridor.
Do they have special uses?

**Open houses help get a community interested** in programs, plans, or projects. Publicity and the procedure call attention to a process that is underway. For a Cleveland, Ohio, light rail transit project, open houses were scheduled to gain name recognition for the project and to call attention to the potential of the line.

**Open houses are used when a project is complex.** A project can be broken into pieces to enhance understanding. Detailed information is presented graphically or in text format allows plenty of time for people to see displays and documents close-up. Agency staffers give oral information to supplement displays.

**Open houses are held at an early stage** in planning or project development to gather information from people. Further along in the process, they update this information comments on the progress of a draft plan or a project. The Pennsylvania DOT used a combination of open houses with workshops to develop issues, goals, and specific policies for its long-range transportation plan.

**Open forum hearings are used primarily with projects,** although a State or a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) may choose to call a public hearing for other purposes. During the environmental process for a project, the Nevada DOT uses the forum format for an "informational hearing" at the beginning of the process and for public hearing at the end of the process. The Nebraska DOT holds formal public hearings at the location stage of a project and open forum hearings at the design stage. The Georgia DOT uses open forum hearings for virtually all of its projects. If attendance is large, the Department gives out numbers for those wanting to speak during the event and make their comments before court reporters.

Who participates? And how?

**Anyone interested in a plan or project development can attend.** New Jersey used open houses as an integral part of its major investment study of a potential Monmouth Ocean–Middlesex Commuter Rail Line.

**Individuals with a specific stake in an issue are urged to attend.** They are especially encouraged to attend open forum public hearings and make their opinions known.

**Open houses or open forum hearings accommodate people who are reluctant to speak** in front of an audience. Casual settings are not as intimidating as a public meeting with a large audience. Participants are encouraged to ask questions. The Orange County, California, transit agency provided bilingual staff at an open house in connection with a major investment study. Staffers were identified by blue dots on their name tags.

**The media should be encouraged to attend.** Information provided is generally comprehensive and may include useful visuals. Staff people involved in the project available for details. People give their opinions of agency proposals or projects.

**Stakeholders prepare visual and written materials to make their viewpoint.** Space can be made available for community viewpoints expressed in documents or at the invitation of the Tennessee DOT, American Indians and environmental groups up to display their own materials at a table during an open forum hearing. People these groups were present to discuss their position.

**People interact directly with staff.** To get a "true" sense of a meeting, public hearing officers circulate around the room, listening to questions and answers. Circulating a staff members a chance to "relieve" others who are being monopolized by one person. Tennessee DOT uses a court reporter and comment cards at hearings, along with a period for further comments by letter, petition, or note.
How do agencies use the output?

Agencies use community comments for guidance in planning or project development. Comments help an agency take the pulse of the community, shape and modify plans, monitor reactions of the individual stakeholders most affected by the proposal or project. Participants in the Orange County, California, transit agency's open house provided advice on how to best structure the subsequent public involvement program.

Agencies review comments and incorporate them into the work wherever possible. They also provide responses for the record to document and acknowledge receipt of input. For open forum public hearings, comments and responses form the bulk of the transcript of a session, which also includes the agency brochure, summaries of audio displays, a transcription of oral comments, and copies of all written comments.

Who leads the process?

Agency staff members always take the lead for hearings and usually for open houses as well. They are responsible for organizing the session, setting up materials, getting staff to the session, recording the testimony, and documenting the process and community attendance. Staff members also respond to comments made at the session.

Agency representatives with expertise in the issues staff the tables at open house sessions. Technical experts or consultants may assist in the process. At open forum hearings, a public hearing officer is appointed by the agency to assure a session’s smooth operation and the agency’s response to comments.

What are the costs?

Open houses and open forum hearings involve significant staff time in preparation and reproduction of materials, such as displays, graphics, brochures, and other materials. Significant staff work on publicity efforts is required to make a session successful. Staff can be briefed to assure that similar questions receive the same answer.

Open houses and open forum hearings are minimally expensive or more elaborate. Expenses increase with the complexity of the project and the scale of graphics or display materials required. Special large graphics dramatize the elements of a project. Expenses also increase as an agency makes extra effort to publicize the event.

Staff needs to be present at sessions held outside normal working hours. If consultants are involved, their contribution is helpful during complex projects or processes.

A hall is needed for the event, and rent may be required. A neutral space is desirable, depending on the level of controversy associated with the session.

How are they organized?

As an early step, an agency defines the issues to be presented. This process choices and preparation of audio-visual materials (whatever graphics tell the story) and also guides the selection of written materials to be distributed.

Based on the issues, an agency designates an event coordinator. For example, the coordinator may be from the planning disciplines if the subject is long-range planning or the engineering disciplines if a project is to be announced or explored.

The agency coordinator sets a date and time for the event. Both date and time need to be convenient for people who are employed during the day. The Regional Transit District...
Sacramento, California, held evening and Saturday open houses to review alternative extension of existing light rail into South Sacramento. In experimenting with alternative times for open forum hearings, the Georgia DOT determined that 4:00 to 7:00 P.M. met community needs. The Michigan DOT has found that 3:30 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. and 7:00 to 8:30 P.M. work best, in part because rural communities often "respect" the dinner hour. Longer hours are essential for controversial or large-scale projects when many people want to participate. Alternatively, multiple sessions may be held at various times.

The coordinator finds space large enough to accommodate not only tables and displays but also traffic flow for people to move efficiently and comfortably between areas. At the same time, space should include a location for taking oral testimony, and the facility should be quiet, comfortable, easy to find, free of conflicting events, and handicapped accessible. Places to sit and rest should be provided. Drinking water is essential.

Multiple locations are desirable for large geographical areas and for planning processes. To encourage people to attend meetings for its Statewide Transportation Improvement Program, the Oregon DOT held open house meetings in school cafeterias, libraries, senior centers, and a community theater. (See Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events.)

An agency gets the word out about the event. A media strategy helps an agency determine content and spacing of announcements. Media announcements dramatically enhance public awareness. Handouts are distributed in areas of potentially high interest. (See Media Strategies.)

The agency prepares illustrative materials for display. Presentation boards, documents, maps, and videos are very helpful. (See Public Information Materials; Video Techniques.) Topics to be illustrated can include traffic, noise, specific sites, economic design, neighborhood impacts, routes, goals, evaluation criteria, and policy issues. Or maps can be provided for visitors to take home. The South Carolina DOT uses color coding on graphics intended for community review to emphasize and highlight the projects of a project.

Tables are provided for specific purposes that allow people to address issues in depth. Each table should be clearly identified. During the feasibility study for the Los Angeles Bakersfield High Speed Ground Transportation Project, tables were provided for the sign-in; orientation and video; routes and stations; environmental study; engineering technology; costs; statewide policy; and terminal station location.

The agency staffs the event. Staff people with specific areas of expertise are scheduled for each table. Reception staff people are essential to welcome new arrivals and to let how the open house works. The Georgia DOT uses a "greeter"—a staffer who welcomes participants and helps them understand the process. Other staff members can aid in recording comments or in explaining issues to people. South Carolina DOT personnel wear name tags to identify themselves and encourage questions from participants.

A method for recording comments from the community is established. At open house sessions, an agency can provide cards for people to fill out, for either immediate or return. For mail-backs, pre-paid postage on the card or envelope speeds response.

For open forum hearings, an agency must provide a formal means of recording comments. The Georgia DOT uses a court reporter to record comments, while the South Carolina DOT provides a staff person to tape record them.

Long lines at stenographer or tape recording stations detract from the informality and convenience of this format for the public. Agencies may provide multiple stenographers or recording stations. The Georgia DOT used two stenographers for an open forum attended by about 1,500 people. Another strategy is to use speaker time limits. At
house on its statewide plan, the New York State DOT used a traffic signal as a device to let speakers know when their speaking time had expired. The Delaware DOT schedules speakers in order of sign-up and adheres to a specified time limit. In other locations, however, time limits would be unacceptable. Agency staff in Michigan successfully rely on the rest of the audience to encourage brevity. Knowing when time limits are essential or appropriate requires a thorough knowledge of the community involved.

**How are they used with other techniques?**

**Open houses can be combined with public meetings.** Displays, brochures, documents, videos, and other materials can introduce a meeting and help people prepare for it. (See **Meetings/Hearings**.)

**Open houses can be partly staffed with civic advisory committee members.** New Haven, Connecticut, Q Bridge Study, committee members staffed open houses ConnDOT respond to questions about the study and the alternatives being considered. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.)

**Open houses often incorporate brainstorming or focus groups.** The Delaware DOT allowed participants to write comments directly on maps. Other people could then read comments and add their opinions. North Carolina’s Triangle Transit Authority conducted focus groups as part of open houses on long-range transit options for the region. (See **Brainstorming; Focus Groups**.)

**Public information is essential,** including press releases, briefings, speakers’ bureaus, brochures, posters, mailings, and media announcements. All information must be timely to assure that public hearing notice requirements are met and to give people time to fit the event into their schedules. Reminders can be sent out a few days before the session. (See **Information Materials; Media Strategies**.)

**Mailing lists are used to contact potentially interested people.** An agency should make special efforts to solicit minority and ethnic participation and attendance at the session. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

**An open house is a convenient place to conduct an informal survey.** People can complete the survey right away or mail it back. In this fashion, an agency obtains results quickly and analyzes the results to ascertain community interest and understanding. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) The Nevada DOT conducted a survey of interested parties in conjunction with an open forum hearing. As part of work on its long-range plan, New Jersey DOT recruited random participants for focus groups during open houses conducted at a shopping mall.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**An open forum hearing without an audience session precludes debate on a proposal’s merits.** Parties do not hear opposing views first-hand—nor do they have the opportunity to clarify stances or raise questions about opposing viewpoints. Some critics charge that agencies use open forum hearings as a “divide-and-conquer” strategy. If differing views are not heard, the public may be surprised to find a controversy exists. When people hear one another, they develop an improved understanding of a proposal and its implications for other people. To assure that multiple viewpoints are presented at an open forum hearing, the Ohio DOT allows community groups to set up exhibition tables near the open meeting tables, labeled clearly to distinguish them from agency tables.

**An open house/open forum hearing only reaches people willing to attend.** Stakeholders who do not attend may not receive essential information, and their opinions are not heard. Translators, translations of summaries, and blue dots on name tags of bilingual staff, were used to supplement the Orange County, California, open house, because
participants said they were ill at ease at such events. (See Ethnic, Minority, and Low Groups.)

**Outreach is limited to a few days, even if hearings are held in different locations.** Single event should not be the sole opportunity for people to be heard. It does not reach large numbers on a continuing basis—a key factor in successful public involvement.

**Informal conversation does not replace written comment.** In brief conversations with agency officials during an open house, people sometimes get lulled into a sense of being heard and fully understood. Agency staff cannot be expected to retain all opinions and must have sufficient time to note each statement. Unless official recording is underway, people encouraged to present written comments, so their opinions or viewpoints are sure to be heard.

**Constituents do not hear elected officials at an open forum hearing.** At traditional public hearings, elected leaders announce their views. At open forum hearings, how officials can speak to only a few people at a time.

**Effective displays and materials may be expensive.** Large-scale graphics and photographs are essential to promote rapid comprehension and understanding of a proposal. Video is often used as a method of explaining both the proposal and the process of review. (See Video Techniques.)

**When are they most effective?**

**An open house effectively disseminates information, either at an early stage or prior to decision-making.** Input to decisions or plans is also collected. Additional events update information and obtain further public input. The Montana DOT uses an open house session to disseminate information, frequently in tandem with a traditional hearing.

**An open forum hearing is useful at the location or design stage for gathering information.** The Montana DOT uses it when it is essential to register opinions from subgroups.

**For further information:**

Connecticut Department of Transportation (860) 594-2000
Georgia Department of Transportation (404) 699-4406
Montana Department of Transportation (406) 444-7205
Nebraska Department of Transportation (402) 479-4871
Nevada Department of Transportation (702) 687-3463
New Mexico Department of Transportation (505) 827-3228
Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (717) 772-2563
South Carolina Department of Transportation (803) 737-1350
Tennessee Department of Transportation (615) 741-2221

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