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Planning Programs on Controversial Issues

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

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4 pages

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When to Plan a Program

Who Can Sponsor a Public Forum?

Purpose of Meeting

Steps in Planning

Resource People

Orientation

Guidelines for Conducting the Program

Handling Questions

Checklist of Tasks for Planning a Public Meeting

Family Living Education
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This bulletin was prepared by Elizabeth Moore, Extension Specialist, Public Affairs Education for Families, Michigan State University. The material was adapted from "Public Affairs Programming on Controversial Issues", a Cooperative Extension Service staff resource prepared by Extension Home Economists: Mary Search (Berrien County), Janet Richardson (Kalamazoo County), and Margaret Ann Ross (Eaton County).



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Planning Programs On Controversial Issues

Controversy may be explosive. However, educational programs on controversial issues do serve an important role in a community. Handling controversy is a part of creative problem solving.

The following format is designed to help you feel more comfortable about planning public forums. The same general approach can be used for meetings on a variety of topics.

When to Plan a Program

A public forum on a controversial issue is appropriate when: rumors about a proposed change are rampant; a new issue has surfaced; the election ballot will contain ballot questions on controversial issues; a new law needs to be explained.

Who Can Sponsor a Public Forum?

- An organized group — social, political, service, school, neighborhood associations, Cooperative Extension Service.
- A coalition of groups — Remember that the credibility and reputation of the sponsoring groups will have a direct influence on the meeting's effectiveness. Keep this in mind as you consider the possibility of having a coalition of groups sponsoring the program.

Purpose of Meeting

Have a clearly stated purpose for the meeting. Keep this in mind during the planning, publicity, and implementation phases.

Steps in Planning

1. Know your **audience** and anticipate possible responses.
2. Keep firm control over **planning and conducting** the meeting.
3. Consider the **length** of the meeting.
4. Consider the **timing** (when the meeting occurs in relation to the level of concern on the issue) and the "**temperature**" of the issue. If you're too early, you may just stir it up. People in your area will give you a clue as to the proper timing for the program. Watch for the issue in "Letters to the Editor" and other reporting. If the meeting is timed properly, it may serve as a calming influence. You can provide an opportunity for the opposing sides to sit down to talk over the issue.

5. Select the **location** for the meeting carefully. Choose a neutral site. It should be comfortable, offer easy access for interested parties, and have adequate parking.
6. **Publicize** the meeting in all the media (newspapers, radio, TV, organizational newsletters, etc.) you have at your disposal. Be very clear in explaining the purpose and the length of the meeting.

Resource People

1. It's a must to get **knowledgeable** people to represent all sides. Get the best speakers available and represent all views.
2. **Involve all sides** in planning and be sure that all sides are fairly represented during the program.
3. Select a **moderator** and/or chairman who is very experienced in conducting meetings. You may want to bring in someone from outside the community. A moderator must be tactful as well as sensitive to differences in the speaking ability of the speakers. A good moderator will have some questions prepared in advance. These questions should be designed to adequately bring out both sides of the issue. The moderator must be alert to signs of dishonesty on the part of any speaker. The moderator then needs to provide an opportunity for rebuttal.

Orientation

1. **Go over the format and ground rules** with all sides so that everyone involved knows all the rules. They must be accepted by all sides. Set specific time allotments and stick to them.
2. Give **equal time** to all sides for their presentations.
3. Be as **fair** as you can.
4. Remember, you're not conducting a debate. The program should run more like a **symposium** (several persons speaking briefly on a topic).

Guidelines for Conducting the Program

1. At the start of the meeting, the moderator needs to explain the format, including time limits and audience participation.
2. Be fair, firm, and good-humored.
3. Discuss facts and opinions, not personalities.
4. Keep the meeting under control at all times.
5. Consider what image you project — calm and reasoned or emotional. Don't lose control of yourself.

Handling Questions

1. Allowing only written questions will keep the audience from making speeches instead of asking questions. Questions may be directed to one side, but then allow all other sides to respond to the question if they wish.
2. If you allow oral questions from the floor, impose a time limit, (30 seconds to 1 minute).
3. If you allow people to comment, impose a time limit, (1 to 2 minutes).
4. You might want to have a panel of questioners rather than using audience questions. Representatives from the media might ask the questions.
5. Or, you may choose to use pre-selected questions.

Checklist Of Tasks For Planning A Public Meeting

The first step: Designate a planning committee — two or three people are sufficient. One month is the absolute minimum for planning time. The committee is responsible for defining the topic, choosing the speakers, determining the format, taking care of the details of arrangements, and coordinating publicity. Other people can be involved for these specific tasks. Check off tasks as completed:

Basic Organization

- ___ Define the topic.
- ___ Select the speakers. Set a tentative date and contact the speakers by phone. Later send a letter confirming the details and explaining the format.
- ___ Determine the format. Decide about introductory comments, the handling of questions, time limits, closing statements.
- ___ Find a moderator. Be certain that the moderator understands your plans for the format.

Arrangements

- ___ Find a room for your meeting. Size, good lighting, adequate parking, central location are all important to consider. Be sure that you and the owner or manager have a clear understanding of rules for the use of the room and have reached an agreement about possible costs.
- ___ Arrange for a microphone, tables, and a podium. Use table mikes if you are having a panel discussion. **Be sure to test prior to meeting.**
- ___ Arrange for chairs for audience and speakers and a table for publications displays.

- ___ Bring paper and pencils if using written questions.
- ___ If available, bring stop watch for timing speeches, questions.
- ___ Bring glasses, pitcher for water for speakers.
- ___ Make some fairly large, readable name signs to be placed in front of each speaker.
- ___ Provide name tags for speakers, and for audience if desired.
- ___ Arrange for coffee, etc. if served.
- ___ Arrange for taping if desired.

PUBLICITY

- ___ Send news releases to local newspapers — include weeklies and shoppers. Some newspapers also have community calendar listings. Be sure you know their deadlines for material.
- ___ Talk to a reporter before the meeting about the possibility of a feature story highlighting the issue.
- ___ Try to arrange radio spots, appearances on TV and radio talk shows, community calendar listings.
- ___ Arrange for newspaper (and possibly radio and TV) coverage of the meeting.
- ___ If you are dealing with a school issue, schools will sometimes agree to sending notices home with the children.
- ___ Contact other interested groups, well in advance if possible, so they can include the information in their newsletters.
- ___ Make some simple posters (you can use rub-on letters and have photocopies made) to post in libraries and public bulletin boards.
- ___ If your area has public access cable television, explore the use of this coverage for your meeting.

