

Methods of Public Engagement

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Problem statement

The question of how, and to what degree, the public should be involved with policy-setting is fundamental to strengthening—and thereby improving—the democratic process. Public agencies, including land management agencies, wrestle with appropriate and meaningful strategies for stakeholder involvement. Even the framers of our Constitution struggled with the basic question of “whether democratic citizens should be expected to work out the solution to such struggles directly among themselves or whether it is possible to adopt a machinery of government which would pump out solutions without requiring such direct citizen engagement. Should the burden of solving public problems rest most directly on citizenship or on government?” (Kemmis 1990:11). It’s no wonder then, that throughout the western United States where large swaths of public land abut private and state lands—and where second homes sprout like weeds—land managers and interested parties alike struggle for meaning in the public participation process.

Background

Building on a wellspring of environmental concerns and regulations, Congress established the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969. This act, a “capstone to the entire national environmental statutory structure” (Kemmis 2001:41), states the following purposes:

- To declare a national policy which will encourage productive and enjoyable harmony between man and his environment;
- To promote efforts which will prevent or eliminate damage to the environment and biosphere and stimulate the health and welfare of man;
- To enrich the understanding of the ecological systems and natural resources important to the nation; and
- To establish a Council on Environmental Quality.

Additionally, the act recognizes “that each person has a responsibility to contribute to the preservation and enhancement of the environment.” Federal agencies are required to comply with NEPA and have distinct policies or guidance to follow. In essence, any proposed federal action is subject to varied levels of NEPA review. By policy, the act requires agencies to “encourage and facilitate public involvement in decisions which affect the quality of the human environment” (CEQ 2007).

Through personal choice or circumstance, many citizens do not involve themselves with governmental concerns. Civil servants, caught up in a race to meet a deadline or simply going through the motions of the NEPA process, may also preclude opportunities for meaningful public involvement. As described in the National Issues Forum’s *Democracy’s Challenge: Reclaiming The Public’s Role*, a general public disengagement has led to “professionals with

special training and expertise” “making decisions and shaping priorities” (Wharton 2006:4). The question remains whether this lack of involvement evolved by conscious choice, or by default as overwhelmed suburban, two-wage earners and single-parent households simply cannot afford the time and energy commitments of such endeavors. One wonders whether the level of public involvement will increase as a large segment of society (the boomers) retire and have more leisure time to pursue various interests. Their impact could be revolutionary.

Public meetings, while sometimes vituperative and harmful to the policy process, remain an important tool in the gathering, creation, and sharing of ideas and information. Structuring the format of such meetings to meet public and agency needs presents an extraordinary challenge. In general, the very fact that a need for a public meeting exists demonstrates varied opinions and values about the subject at hand. Civility is not a safe assumption. At times, arrangements are necessary to ensure personal safety for public servants and the public. Land managers ponder the constructive value of various meeting formats, and in particular the old standby of a public hearing, which according to Daniel Kemmis in *Community and the Politics of Place* (1990) is anything but a listening opportunity. “In fact, out of everything that happens at a public hearing—the speaking, the emoting, the efforts to persuade the decision maker, the presentation of facts—the one element that is almost totally lacking is anything that might be characterized as ‘public hearing’” (p. 53).

How, then, does the land manager create a safe environment whereby the agency and issue stakeholders can meaningfully exchange knowledge and ideas to reach durable decisions? This paper explores a range of public engagement strategies ranging from information-sharing to full collaboration, as shown in Figure 1. Each of these perspectives illustrates varying levels of commitment (between citizens and government) that the agency may choose as appropriate to the amount of time, money and energy available for a particular project or process. Examples from the literature and from the author’s work in various federal land management agencies demonstrate the value of each of these strategies.

Perspective One: Inform

Information-sharing represents a low-to-moderate level of public and agency involvement. This gives the agency an opportunity to provide information such as technical reports and draft strategies or ideas for problem resolution to the public. Importantly, it also provides the agency an opportunity to learn from its stakeholders. Documents or discussions shared with stakeholders may produce essential critiques of an agency proposal. Likewise, venues such as open houses, information fairs, and newsletters generate discussion and new perspectives on issues. Two key elements to the success of this approach include (1) whether the public believes their opinions and concerns are heard, and (2) how the agency incorporates new information and ideas. Transparency, while difficult to achieve given the various managerial facets to any problem, is critical in this otherwise fairly low-risk method of public involvement.

Examples of contentious issues that benefit from this approach include past approaches to winter use management in Yellowstone and the wilderness debate in some states. In the northern Rocky Mountains for example, Kemmis describes wilderness issues as “[pitting]

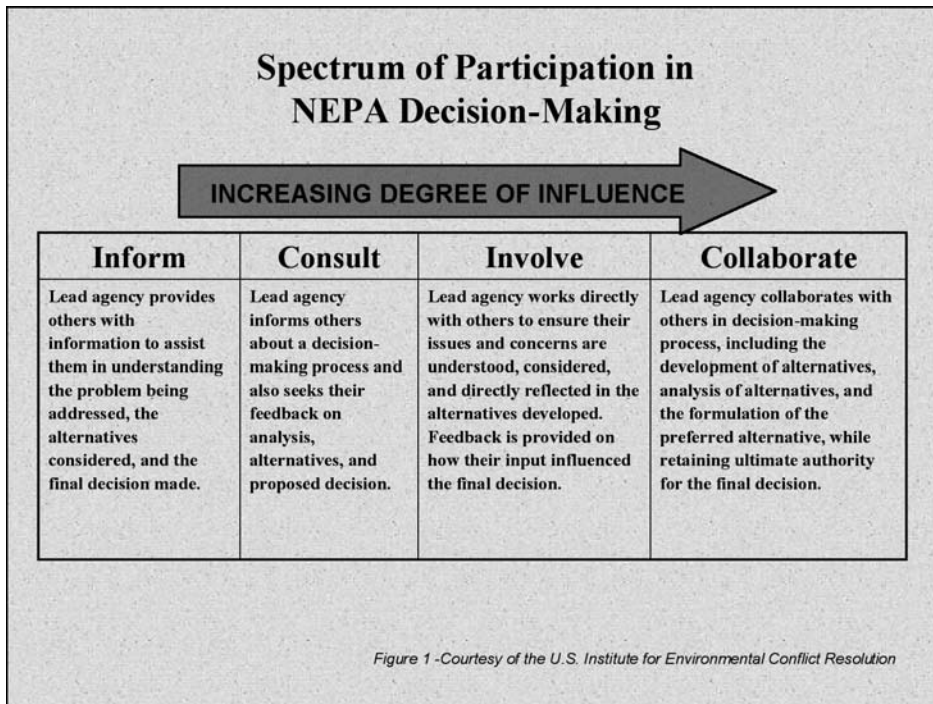


Figure 1. The spectrum of participation in decision-making under the National Environmental Policy Act.

various interests ... against each other in a standoff struggle which has sapped the energy and resources of all concerned. At the same time, this struggle has gradually undermined nearly all parties' faith that the process of public decision making is in fact capable of identifying or producing the public interest" (1990:39). The same could be said of the running debate over appropriate winter uses in Yellowstone or off-highway vehicle travel on public lands throughout the West.

Information-sharing is one way to transmit ideas and information to and from polarized interests in a non-threatening manner. This technique may allow discourse that would otherwise not occur. Information-sharing is an opportunity to be transparent about agency action. It allows for public review and comment without consensus or collaboration. To succeed with this or any other method of engagement requires diligence, repetition, facilitation, and meetings of all types.

Perspective two: Consult and involve

"The input and advice of citizens may be necessary to develop effective public policy, but they are rarely sufficient to build agreement among diverse interests. Because of the diversity of viewpoints expressed during public involvement processes, government officials typically receive competing, conflicting ideas on what to do. It is then up to them to make the necessary trade-offs among competing viewpoints and to render a decision" (McKinney 2001:36). Although Figure 1 shows consultation and involvement as distinct methods, actu-

al implementation of either involves significant elements of both; it is a porous rather than impermeable line that separates the middle ground between information-sharing and collaboration.

Effective techniques of consultation and involvement are much the same as those used in information-sharing and collaboration—the difference being largely one of tone and level of involvement. Agency actions under perspective two would clearly state the role of the decision-maker, but greater effort towards understanding stakeholder positions and incorporating or revising elements of concern are likely. Examples of this method include the recently completed Gallatin National Forest travel plan and on-going winter use planning in Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks. This method involves moderate risk and is unlikely to satisfy either stakeholders or the agency because it produces a decision where everyone feels disgruntled.

Perspective three: Collaborate

Occasionally, situations are ripe for full collaboration. This process is lengthy and untidy, but when used appropriately, it will generate durable decisions because all relevant parties are involved in creating solutions. “The essence of collaborative decision making is to reconcile the interests of affected parties. . . . Interests are needs, desires, concerns, and fears, the intangible items that underlie people’s positions or the items they want. [Collaborative decision-making] involves probing and examining concerns, devising creative solutions, and making trade-offs to accommodate competing interests . . . it refers to a process whereby a group of people work together to achieve a common purpose and share resources. Collaborative processes may be more or less inclusive, depending on the intent of the participants, and may or may not rely on consensus as a way of making decisions” (McKinney 2001:35).

One example of this approach is from Missoula, Montana, where an environmental group and a pulp mill operator started as adversaries and moved toward collaboration. “Eventually the two sides were able to agree on a solution which they jointly presented to the Water Quality Bureau. [T]he crucial element which made this possible . . . was the gradual building of a sense of trust between the parties. Moving slowly, a small step at a time, the parties had gradually demonstrated to one another their good faith and reliability, to the point that they were able to trust each other to make a joint presentation to the decision maker. By that time, they had themselves in effect become the decision makers, but only because they had been willing to move together into the unoccupied territory of collaboration” (Kemmis 1990:114).

While examples of shared decision-making are not yet commonplace—and the frustration and unsuccessful examples of previous decades indicate that consensus lies somewhere over the rainbow—both agency personnel and the public truly want better opportunities to create and influence durable decisions. It would seem then, that since all parties yearn for meaning in the public participation process, opportunities for shared decision-making exist. Our job is to seek them out and inject combined knowledge, skills, and abilities to create a satisfactory public process. One technique to accomplish this is a collaborative learning approach.

Two instances of successful stakeholder engagement in complex and controversial situations are described by Gregg Walker, Susan Senecah, and Steven Daniels as situations in which “collaborative learning emphasizes activities that encourage systems thinking, joint learning, open communication, constructive conflict management, and a focus on appropriate change” (Walker et al. 2006:195). In essence, these experiments in collaborative learning demonstrate that listening well, relationship-building, and transparency can all lead not only to appropriate change, but to acceptable change.

Conclusion: It’s all about relationships and communication

No matter the technique, engaging the public in decision-making is a difficult process. Over the years since the implementation of NEPA, federal agencies have struggled with how best to involve stakeholders in decisions. Shared decision-making, whether consensus based or collaborative learning or something else entirely, is clearly the most hopeful means of improving a situation through desirable and feasible change. Polarization and deeply held values color decisions and influence public processes. Civil servants must recognize this and harness the valuable resource of democratic opportunity. If durable agency decisions are the objective, then meaningful stakeholder involvement is essential and collaboration is the best approach.

Potential roadblocks to meaningful stakeholder engagement include misinformation, distrust, and a lack of sincerity (real or perceived). An honest approach to information-sharing or full collaboration (or anything in between) can build trust. Building relationships between agency personnel and issue stakeholders—while time-consuming and difficult—leads to relevance in public meetings of any format. While the level of influence and amount of participation in agency decision-making can be legally driven, developing an appropriate level of engagement outside the legal process is obviously preferable. Because the information-sharing method is low-risk, it is likely to minimally satisfy stakeholders and the agency. Conversely, high-risk collaboration efforts bring significant reward.

“It is doubtful if any society has ever used the word *public* as incessantly as we now do. We have public hearings to help us shape public policy about issues like public lands, public education, public welfare, and public health...” (Kemmis 1990:4). Kemmis goes on to state that public decisions are determined by opinion polls; although one could argue that public agencies don’t originate public opinion polls—that is exactly what most public comment periods devolve to. While this rather pessimistic viewpoint discounts the value of individual and group input to agency processes, it sheds light on the baggage typically brought to a public meeting or process. It takes time, energy, skill and determination to overcome this and move forward collaboratively. The obvious benefits of durable decisions and enhanced stakeholder relationships make these resources ones public land managers should find ways to develop.

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