

Getting Out to Where the People Are

by Elaine Cogan

We're Having a Public Event at the Shopping Mall. Won't you Drop by and Tell us What you Think about the Future of our Town?

It was a sunny Friday. People were at their local mall as usual, shopping, strolling, meeting their friends and neighbors. Prominent among the storefronts, in the center of all the activity, was something new: a display about Our Town – what it is and what it might become, depending on the planning decisions that soon would be made.

Maps and drawings and possible alternatives in simple text were displayed attractively. Staff and commissioners stood nearby to engage onlookers in conversation and entice them to participate. People were invited to stay as long as they liked – to write their comments on the displays and handy pads of paper, talk to planners, fill out questionnaires, and otherwise participate in a low-key but important exercise to help determine their community's future.

Compliments abounded. "No one ever asked my opinion before!" "Thanks for coming out to the mall. I never have time for meetings." "It's great that you'll be here after work. I'll be back with my husband." Seniors dropped by and wrote down their opinions, all the while reminiscing about days gone by. Teen rappers and mall employees were quick to point out what they liked and did not favor about the suggested alternatives. A diverse variety of people was obviously comfortable and familiar in the mall environment and willing to participate when asked.

For the organizers, it was a long, exhausting yet exhilarating day. We were at the mall early in the morning before it opened to set up the displays and on our feet until 7 that evening. At times, we felt like barkers cajoling people "Just look," or "Try it. You might like it." Most people

did at least take a peek and many stayed to take advantage of the many non-adversarial ways to voice their opinions. Some held intense conversations with their friends or members of the planning commission and staff.

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But it was all in a spirit of goodwill and civility. In that environment, it would have been unthinkable to behave otherwise.

From more than 25 years experience designing and facilitating public participation processes, it is obvious to me that the most successful are those where we go out to the people – not expect them to come to us. Only the most committed or zealous citizens will come out to a public meeting just because the planning board or staff think it is important. Why the mall? Because that is where the people

are! I have arranged two events in shopping malls such as described above and the success has been phenomenal.

If you are not so inclined or ambitious, there are other ways to take your planning show on the road. Put up mini-displays at the local library or community center, always with opportunities for the public to comment. Organize a speakers bureau and make presentations to your local neighborhood and civic organizations. Get on the Web. Nearly every community has a Web site, some more ambitious and attractive than others. Post your information and invite comments. In all these ways, and more you probably can think of, you will reach people who may never otherwise be involved in civic activity.

Public involvement that truly engages the hearts and minds of the citizenry in a civil manner is increasingly difficult to obtain. We all know people with strong opinions will make their voices heard at public hearings and other formal occasions. But what about all those times it would be valuable to learn what people think before the controversy erupts, or perhaps to defuse it entirely in an environment that encourages dialogue and conversation?

Be creative in choosing venues that encourage such interaction and you will be well rewarded. With these approaches, it is even possible you will avoid entirely the yelling and polarizing meetings that benefit no one. ♦

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Online Comment

"It's very true that you have to go out to where the people are – and when they're there. When we do charrettes and similar activities in small towns that don't have malls, I've found that coupling the events with pancake breakfasts or fish fries at the local volunteer fire department usually help get the folks out. Food is always a great way to draw a crowd. ... I also find that if you have pictures (especially ones taken by local residents with disposable cameras we give them), and maps and let folks write on and/or draw on them, it makes it even more real for them.

– Jim Segedy, AICP, Muncie, Indiana, Chair, Small Town & Rural Planning Division, APA