

# Facilitating Community Forums

Jennifer Bridge, Meade County Extension—Family and Consumer Sciences

As United States citizens, we value our freedoms, especially our freedom to speak. As a civilized society, we understand the importance of being able to express our views and opinions as well as to listen to those of others. While we may not always agree, we value the person's right to speak. Public forums provide a structured way for communities to come together and communicate effectively to foster understanding and work toward finding solutions to community problems.

## What Are Community Forums?

Community forums are well-publicized and organized ways for citizens to discuss issues with experts or knowledgeable people. Depending on the purpose and community interest, a forum can be used to gather information from citizens on topics that may have a profound impact on their life or on the community as a whole.

Decision makers often use public forums to evaluate public opinion and seek the needs of the people. This input can be valuable in helping to make the best decision, particularly if the decision will dramatically affect or influence a community. By giving citizens a voice through open dialogue, a better understanding can be created. Not only are community forums valuable to decision makers, they can also foster understanding as citizens are exposed to other opinions and ideas.

## Key Elements in Conducting a Community Forum

Planning and conducting an effective community forum requires several key elements. Scheduling a meeting place and choosing a location and time should be carefully considered. Choosing the right people to lead the forum is also important. There are three key individuals who work together to facilitate and provide direction for the forum: the moderator, the speaker, and the recorder. Selecting an unbiased moderator, a speaker who is an expert or knowledgeable on the topic, and a recorder to preserve the proceedings can build trust and credibility. Community members also play an important role by bringing their perspective to the forum.

The meeting place and location are important and can set the tone of the meeting. The forum should be held in a central location with easy access and adequate parking. If there is sufficient interest, the forum should be held in multiple locations to allow a variety of opportunities for citizen input.

The time of day plays a key role as well. The time should be set when most people can attend and allow adequate time to present information and gather input. If multiple forums will be held on a topic, varying the time of day will allow greater opportunity for participation. This is important if the community has a large work force with different shifts, or a commuter workforce who travel out of the community to work.

The moderator serves as the facilitator as well as the "Sergeant of Arms" and can keep



*"Dialog can be thought of as a form of conversation that makes it possible, even likely, for participants to become aware of some of the hidden and tacit assumptions that derive from our cultural learning, our language, and our psychological makeup."*

*-Schein*



the forum orderly and productive. When selecting a moderator keep a few questions in mind. Does the person have experience moderating? Will they be able to remain objective and not insert their personal opinion? Do they reside and work outside the county? Do they have knowledge of the situation or topic but more importantly do they possess the ability to facilitate a meeting effectively?

A moderator will introduce basic rules of conduct for the forum, introduce the topic and give credentials for the speaker. The moderator will remain unbiased and will not have a conflict of interest with either the speaker or the topic. Often, the moderator will set an ending time for the forum prior to starting, which helps keep the speaker and comments portion concise and on track. The moderator will keep the meeting flowing smoothly, including moderating the speaker and participants.

The speaker will offer a concise presentation on the topic and be mindful of the time in which to allow comments and inputs from the community. The speaker must be knowledgeable of the topic and the information presented must be factual. The information should not be based on personal opinion or the opinion of a particular interest. The speaker should be unbiased in order to build public trust.

The recorder should be appointed in advance, be prepared to capture the proceedings of the meeting and provide information after the meeting as to what took place. The recorder should also be unbiased and not have a particular interest in the topic so the proceedings are reflected accurately.

The citizens have a very important role. They must be willing to listen to varying views and express their own. Often citizens have a personal interest in the topic, which has compelled them to attend. Some feel passionate about their feelings and can be emotional in their thoughts and processes. By attending and participating in the fo-

rum, they can express their views and gain greater understanding of a particular topic. Likewise, decision makers can gain greater understanding of an issue or topic through open dialogue.

One of the most important elements of conducting a community forum is creating awareness of the event. More than one method should be used. Utilize local media via newspaper, radio or television stations, post flyers on community bulletin boards, mail flyers to local churches and businesses and ask them to post on bulletin boards. Businesses posting on marquees or electronic signs are also a great way to get the word out, and posting on websites and community Facebook pages are effective at reaching other audiences. Most communities have gathering places such as small country stores or local restaurants where people gather and talk about community topics. Be sure to make contact to let them know about the upcoming forum. Effective publicity does not have to cost a great deal.

## After the Community Forum

Once the forum or series of forums have concluded, make sure the proceedings are available to those attending and to the community. Accurate proceedings can provide clarity and transparency as decisions on key issues are decided.

## Summary

Community forums can serve as a great way to gather information and ideas related to topics of impact or interest to the community. Whether you are hosting the forum, participating by serving as a guest speaker providing input, asking questions or simply listening, you can play a key role in providing positive direction, which can affect a community for years to come.

## References

*Community Toolbox*. (2013). Retrieved 8, 8, 2013, from University of Kansas: <http://ctb.ku.edu>