

Improving Public Input

NLN Watershed Watch Article, May 2002

When newspaper headlines upset you and you feel the need to speak out, *what can you do?* There is nothing worse than attending long evening meetings, preparing insightful comments, speaking clearly and effectively, and not receiving a response to your concerns. Here are a few ideas to guide citizens and communities to improve public input in the planning process.

What *Citizens* Can Do

Personal Preparation A Must

1. Contact town hall and review project plans to understand the details to prepare for future meetings.
2. Be accurate with the facts.
3. Join efforts with other citizens that share your concerns, and form temporary or long term coalitions.
4. Seek assistance on issues by contacting organizations that understand planning issues, or research issues on web sites devoted to planning issues.

Work With Local Officials

1. Invite members of town council, environmental commission or planning boards to your coalition meetings.
2. Envision how local officials could help resolve your concerns.
3. Remain calm when presenting your concerns, try not to be demeaning in your remarks. Focus on the subject and issues, *not* on personalities or politics.
4. Suggest solutions or recommendations that address your concerns – or suggest to meet in less formal settings to jointly discuss your concerns.
5. In advance of the meeting, address your recommendations in writing to appropriate board members or local officials.

Work With State Officials

1. Site Plans are required to identify permits that must be obtained. Upon review of this permit list, learn what role state agencies may have for the propose project .
2. Review the NJDEP website directory to contact information for the various permitting office to discuss your concerns. Follow-up with written comments to the permitting officials. www.state.nj.us/dep
3. Ensure that state funding is not promoting sprawling developments, and that state funding is allocated to smart growth initiatives, the State Plan principles and sustainable growth.

What Your *Community* Can Do Better

Improve Availability of Public Records

1. Provide summary lists of all public records filed for specific projects.

2. Provide access to records beyond typical 9-4 PM timeframes, which is difficult for many working residents. Local libraries can provide evening hours.
3. Sell copies or CD copies of planning reports.
4. Place copies of draft planning reports in local libraries, on town websites, or on shared websites. (ie. The GIS Center for Stony Brook has posted the Master Plan for Montgomery & Hopewell Twp.)
5. Site plans can be posted outside the meeting room 1-3 days prior to the discussions to allow interested residents opportunities to view the plans.
6. When significant public input is anticipated, developers should provide reduced copies of essential site plans for the audience to review.

Be Responsive to Public Concerns

1. Public hearings often do not provide opportunities for responses to public comments. When significant public input is expected - change the presentation format to a forum, workshop or a subcommittee roundtable to allow and encourage public discussion and exchanges of ideas.
2. Workshops could be held before formal hearings
3. Record public comment and provide responses on subsequent meeting nights.
4. Provide emails or websites where ideas can be posted or summarized. Update websites by posting meeting notices, ordinance or zoning changes, and outcomes of hearings.
5. Local officials or professional staff can summarize planning decisions in articles or editorials to local papers routinely.
6. Meetings or hearings can be televised to local networks.

Useful Regional Websites

Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association
www.thewatershed.org

Association of NJ Environmental Commissions
www.anjec.org

Center for Watershed Protection
www.cwp.org

EPA Office of Water
www.epa.gov/owow/nps/ordinance/

NJ Conservation Foundation
www.njconservation.org

NJ Dept. of Environmental Protection
www.state.nj.us/dep/

NJDEP Green Acres Program
www.state.nj.us/dep/greenacres

Office of State Planning
www.nj.stateplan.com

Penns Neck Area EIS Partners' Roundtable
www.pennsneckareaeis.org

Raritan Basin Project
www.raritanbasin.org

The GIS Center
www.giscenter.org

The Watershed Institute
www.thewatershedinstitute.org