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So Many Issues, So Little Time: Adapting the National Issues Forum Model for Local Public Issue Forums

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Abstract

After several years of contentious, growth-related public meetings in the county, the Extension educator and citizen-volunteers adapted the National Issues Forums model to produce monthly, locally focused public issues forums. They provide a venue for citizens to learn about and deliberate the emerging and current issues in a non-threatening environment. As a result, public issues education has increased many times over, and citizens are better able to participate in public decision making. Public officials often attend the forum and are willing presenters.

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So Much Controversy

Skagit County, Washington lies halfway between Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia. With strong roots in agriculture and natural resources, but only 30 miles north of an encroaching metropolis, citizens in the county faced many complex public policy choices, most related to growth. Public issue meetings and hearings were generally contentious and left both the public and city and county staff frustrated, disillusioned, or angry. Because local media had to choose from a myriad of issues to report, some policy discussions were covered in depth, some in part, and some not at all.

There Had To Be a Better Way

In 1997, after attending National Issues Forum (NIF) training, the Extension educator talked to community leaders about conducting NIF-style public issue forums to provide a more effective, non-contentious approach to public issues education and community dialogue. Hearing this, an ad hoc group of five citizen-activists asked if they could work with her. They wanted the same thing:

- To bring local, current, and emerging issues into non-threatening public discussions;
- A forum where people could learn about the issues, feel free to ask questions, and be able to express opinions without being attacked; and
- Participatory discussions where people could compare and weigh the options.

If these citizen-activists had not come forward, the Extension educator would have recruited volunteers interested in public affairs to work with her.

Making It Work

The founders organized as a 501(c)(3) corporation with a rotating board of eight directors. The Extension educator is an *ex-officio* member. Board members who represent various economic, cultural and social interests in the county are purposely recruited, and they have these characteristics:

- Interest in providing public issues education,

- Awareness of current and emerging local issues, and
- Willingness to share the workload.

The educator identified success strategies with the founding board and provided leadership to incorporate these strategies into the organization:

- A clear mission;
- A diverse, committed board of directors;
- Sharing the workload;
- Criteria for selecting timely topics;
- A commitment to presenting a balanced range of opinions on complex, often contentious, public issues;
- Ground rules;
- A deliberative dialogue; and
- A moderated discussion.

The group produces eight or nine public issue forums each year. Board members select topics and speakers by consensus at their monthly meetings. The educator initially moderated the forums, but in 2002 she trained other board members to take on the responsibility. The educator maintains the mailing list and sends out announcements. A 500-word report of each forum is written by a board member and published in the newspaper. A board member built and now maintains the Web site, <http://www.skagitforum.org/>.

Adapting the NIF Model for Local Public Issue Forums

The forums are modeled on National Issues Forums, but the board does not fully frame each issue or publish an issue guide. There are too many hot topics and not enough resources to frame issues on a monthly basis. A modified approach is used. At the forums, the three or four invited speakers each briefly present (10-12 minutes each) a different view of the issue. Then the public participants engage in an open but moderated dialogue with the speakers and each other. This format also differs from NIF in that the moderator does not facilitate a discussion one viewpoint at a time, but waits until all the speakers' views are presented.

Deliberative dialogue is an important element of the forum. It is a dialogue structured to weigh the consequences and costs of the various options, not debate them (Mathews & McAfee, 2000).

Deliberative dialogue is incorporated two ways. As part of the ground rules, the guidelines are displayed on a large poster and reviewed at the beginning of each forum by the moderator. "Weigh views of others carefully," and "Consider the pros, cons, trade-offs, costs and consequences," are explained, along with more traditional ground rules (e.g. "It's okay to disagree"). Participants are encouraged to incorporate the deliberation principles into the discourse. Near the end of the forum, NIF guidelines are used to summarize the discussion and bring closure during the last 10-15 minutes of the 90 minute forum:

- Identify the costs and consequences of the various options,
- Identify the trade-offs,
- Identify any potential unintended consequences, and
- Identify any shared sense of direction, or common ground for action.

Conclusion

The forum completed six seasons in May 2004. The concept of participatory public meetings where divergent points of view are discussed, without threats and name-calling, is a new norm in the county. Public issues education has increased many times over. The forum has helped citizens understand complex issues and increased the community's understanding by adding local, citizen-based knowledge to the community dialogue much more than in the past.

Here is what a County Commissioner said. His views represent those of other elected officials surveyed in 2003. "I wish the county had more of it. The forum lays out the issues so everyone can understand them." As a decision-maker, he said the forum provides information in a different context than he typically gets in a written report. This was valuable to him.

Forum participants also value the process. Here is a sampling of what they said in the survey.

- "It gives all sides of the story and allows me to decide."
- "Provides a 'safe' arena where important public issues can be addressed."
- "[It] broadened my understanding by bringing in multiple views."
- "All views need to be aired in order to fully understand the issues."
- "Objectivity is vital . . . leave unchanged."

References

Mathews, D. & McAfee, N. (2000). *Making choices together: the power of public deliberation*. Dayton: Kettering Foundation.

National Issues Forums (frames national issues and publishes issue guides). Information available at: <http://www.nifi.org/>

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