



Developers: Neighborhood Meetings That Build Support for Your Project

*This information is provided by GrowSmart Maine as a result of feedback from the public at the June 2016 Forum: **Growth in Portland: Can Public Process Help Bridge the Divide?***

For many developers, there are few things more unpleasant than having to stand in front of a potentially hostile group and try to defend a project you are invested in – financially and/or emotionally. Given this, many people’s idea of a good public meeting is one with a low turnout. No one says this out loud, of course, but many think it. And this is understandable if you have been publicly raked over the coals by a disgruntled resident – or three.

But neighborhood meetings are important, because they are one of the best tools you have to make your project successful. Why? Because it gives you the opportunity to fix problems early. It gives you the chance to hear about issues that might affect marketability. Most of all, it gives you the opportunity to build relationships with people who – quite frankly – have the power to make your project something to be proud of ... or something that will cause you many sleepless nights.

There are a few rules to follow to make sure your meeting goes well.

1. **Have your first meeting as soon as possible.** Most municipalities have a requirement on when a neighborhood meeting must take place. Do yourself a favor – schedule it even sooner. An introductory meeting before you have ANYTHING set in stone will give you valuable feedback on what kind of things are likely to be acceptable and where the neighborhood might want to draw the line. You will likely want to have several more meetings as your project progresses.
2. **Make the meeting convenient for the neighborhood** in terms of timing and give people plenty of notice. Think of how busy your own schedule is: a three-week lead time will give people a chance to adjust plans, get a babysitter, etc. And of course, make sure the meeting takes place **IN** the neighborhood.
3. **Work with the local Neighborhood Association** to help get the word out. Some communities only require that you send notices to abutters within a certain distance. But your project will typically affect people much farther away than the requirement, so make sure they too know what is going on. The Neighborhood Association officials can help with that, and also give you invaluable background on the neighborhood and how its history and issues may affect attitudes about your project. They can also advise what is the most successful time of day and day of the week to have your meeting.

4. **Begin your meeting with introductions and background.** Tell them who you are and what your goal is for the project. Why did you choose this location? How do you see it fitting in the neighborhood? How does it fit within current zoning? Then ask them to introduce themselves and tell where they live and how they feel about the neighborhood. (This is also a good way to find out if anyone at the meeting is not actually from the neighborhood.)
5. **Explain the purpose of the meeting.** Are you here to introduce a concept and get feedback? Show preliminary designs? Explain this, and be clear as to what the next steps will be. What stage are you at in terms of your building application to the municipality? When is the most useful time for public feedback? Is today the last time they can comment, or will there be other opportunities? Explain the process of the municipality itself – most people have no idea how these things work and will really appreciate some context on the process.
6. **LISTEN. This is the most important rule.** When you have an idea for a project, or an actual design, it is very difficult not to be defensive when people make alternative suggestions. Do not be defensive. School yourself to just listen, take good notes, and think about whether the suggestions are legitimate. Even better, ask questions. Are these suggestions generally considered a good idea by most of the attendees? What are some other ideas? Ask what specific alternatives the attendees might suggest. If you hold a meeting and spend the whole time explaining that you are right and they are wrong, you are simply wasting your time and everyone else's. Residents will walk away knowing that you do not respect their perspective – and this will solidify any resistance.
7. **Understand that most people hate change and it may take time for them to warm up to your proposal.** It is a sad but true fact; try not to be judgmental.
8. **Get contact information from all attendees – not just because the municipality requires it but so you can provide updates on your project on an ongoing basis.** This builds relationships and people who feel like they have a relationship with you will cut you more slack than those who don't.
9. **Serving food never hurts.** This is not an essential, but some of the best meetings we've seen were made friendlier by making food a part of it.
10. **Reach out to some segments of the neighborhood through other organizations, either religious or social.** Again, your Neighborhood Association can point you in the right direction here. For example, immigrant populations rarely attend meetings and if they are an important part of the neighborhood, it is your responsibility to reach out to them in a way that makes them comfortable.
11. **Invite the appropriate city councilor, planning board member or selectmen.** This is often overlooked but both the residents and the representatives will appreciate making this connection.

Follow these rules and you will have a much better chance of building good will and ensuring an ongoing and productive conversation with the neighborhood - as well as successfully building something that fulfills your financial and community goals.