

When controversy comes to your neighborhood

Tips and tools



Most Portland Neighborhood Association meetings are calm events where neighbors can receive information that is important to their geographic neighborhood. Each association develops their own process for running their meetings and establishing their own ground rules.

But sometimes neighborhoods have to deal with controversial issues. Suddenly the 15 regular attendees become 150 and too often chaos reigns.

This booklet offers some tips for having the most successful meetings possible in high conflict situations.

I. Tips for Neighborhood Association Leaders/Meeting Conveners

SLOW IT DOWN.

Controversy can put people into high gear at exactly the time they need to slow down and be sure that there is adequate time to address the issue productively and thoughtfully.

Educate yourself.

Make sure you fully understand what is being asked of the NA, where things are in the process, and anything else you need to know about the issue or the people involved. If there are aspects of the controversy where some expertise is needed try to get people to the meeting who can speak to that with authority. Examples might be an issue with environmental impacts, zoning and code issues, or public safety issues. Some examples of the types of questions you will want to explore at this stage are:

- Is there a legal/governmental process for this issue?
- What laws, codes or regulations impact this issue?
- If so, what are the timelines and deadlines?
- Who is in charge of the overall process issue?
- What has happened so far?
- Who are the stakeholders and have they been fully informed and engaged?

Decide how you want your own process to go.

Sometimes people will come to the neighborhood association early in the process asking for the NA's support. Think about when it works best to take a vote. ***Once you have decided that you are voting you have raised the stakes and people become more polarized.*** Consider delaying your vote until all public meetings have been held so that everyone has the best opportunity for education and dialogue and/or debate.

Ask questions and allow an opportunity for the questions to be answered. Sometimes people will bring information to a meeting that they *believe* to be true, but may not be accurate.

Consider delaying votes until all issues raised have been answered adequately and with correct information.

II. Tips for planning the public meetings

Be clear about your goals for the meeting and design the meeting to meet those goals. A meeting to educate and consider pro's and con's might look quite different from a meeting to take a vote. Know what you want and proceed accordingly.

Whatever process you chose, keep it as simple as possible and make it very clear to all attendees, including putting it in writing either on big paper or on the agenda, or both!

Consider getting an outside facilitator.

Frequently the Board Chair is the facilitator of the regular neighborhood meetings. When an issue is contentious the leadership is more effective if they can remain open to working with all sides. It's also no picnic to be the target of people's frustration and anger. If you do work with an outside facilitator be committed to supporting them.

Trained facilitators can be a great resource in helping you design the structure of the meeting to get what you want out of it.

Consider the Structure of the meeting.

Keep in mind different learning styles. Some people can process information very quickly. Others are what are called "reflective observers." This type of learner needs time to think about what they have heard and to formulate a clear position. Having information available in writing helps some people. Consider having materials and a process that meets most of these common adult learning style needs. Some tips for assuring this include:

- Give people materials in writing.
- Try to give people time to reflect before having to vote.

Think about how to give everyone a chance to be heard.

When issues are controversial and there is concern about the meeting getting out of control there is a natural tendency to tighten things up and add more structure. Greater amounts of structure can limit the quality and quantity of input from people. In controversial situations you have people who are often already frustrated by feeling unheard. If a process is used that limits peoples' input— like using a city council style of giving testimony where everyone gets a limited amount of time— this can further frustrate the meeting attendees.

Make sure there is time for different perspectives to be heard.

When people come to a contentious meeting they are usually there because they want their opinion to be heard, considered and counted. One way to do this is to have a presentation by both “sides” in an issue then have the members spend 15 minutes talking among themselves. Give them some questions to consider such as, “What are your concerns about this?”, “What about this do you think is a good idea?” and “Do you need more information?” Then be sure each group can report out while someone records their answers and questions. Answer all of the questions that you can.

Giving people some time to talk can often diffuse the tension enough to have a good discussion and meeting.

Tips for making sure everyone has a chance to talk:

- Use small groups. You can offer questions for discussion that might help people think about an issue from more than their own perspective.
- Have people turn to their neighbor to discuss what they have heard (this can take as little as 5 minutes).
- Provide a handout for written feedback.

Enforce your ground rules.

Neighborhood Association meetings are public meetings where all comers should know that they will be treated respectfully. People can disagree, even strongly, without resorting to name calling, flinging accusations or rude behavior. Your facilitator can help with this, but the neighborhood leadership needs to set the tone.

Ways to set the tone:

- Have the chair and/or facilitator get agreement on the ground rules (“*These are the ground rules for our meeting tonight, does everyone agree to abide by them?*”)
- Have neighborhood leaders sit among the crowds so they can calm things down in the groups if needed.
- Have one (or two!) people assigned step outside the room to talk to anyone who either isn’t following the ground-rules or who doesn’t agree to abide by them.

Be prepared for the vote.

Be clear on what you are voting on. Have a member of the board make the motion; when lots of people come out for a contentious vote there is sometimes a concern about whether everyone is eligible to vote. Having everyone sign in with an address then calling a role call vote is a good way to keep that clear.

III. Facilitator Tips for defusing challenging participants

One of the very most effective tools for the meeting facilitator is to use the group!

Point repeaters: Sometimes people continue to repeat points that you feel have been given adequate time. **Use the group to help you!** Asking the group, “Does anyone need to hear more on this point?” can be very effective. Most people are less likely to continue in the face of a whole group’s request that they move on than they are if only the facilitator asks them.

Screamers, cursers and angry people: When people express strong negative emotions, it can be challenging for everyone (even the people doing the yelling). Remember not to take what they share personally and remain calm. Tell people that you are interested in hearing their thoughts, but that the manner in which they are delivering them is not helpful. Share that you are not trying to shut them down, just make it easier for everyone to understand them. Address the behavior and give them a chance to correct it. “I really want to hear your thoughts on this, but I need you to communicate in a less disruptive way (or I need you to respect our ground-rules).”

Old grudges: Many times issues remind people of other times they have been frustrated with “losing” or not feeling heard on a matter. Resentments do build, but you don’t want to let them cloud judgment about the issue before you. Be clear about what you are talking about and consider offering opportunities, when possible, to resolve old conflicts. Acknowledge the frustration, but be firm in upholding your agenda. “I know many of you feel frustrated about _____, we need to focus on this issue right now but we can look at whether there is any opportunity to address old grievances later.” (If you don’t think that’s possible you don’t have to offer another opportunity to talk about it.)

Keep it light when you can: Hot topics make everyone nervous. The calmer you are the more it helps the group. Controversy is a regular part of civic life and the neighborhood meetings is an appropriate place for the community to dialogue, debate, and struggle with tough issues. It’s possible to disagree, even vehemently, with respect. Remember, after the issue has past you are all still neighbors.

When none of it works: Have a plan in place and act as a team. If someone is unable to respect the ground rules and the process of the meeting, ask them to leave. If personal safety is not a concern a designated board member can ask the person to step outside the room where the individual(s) can talk to the board member personally. “We really need to move on (let others talk, conclude this part of the meeting, etc). Bob can talk to you more in the hall if you’d like.” If personal safety is a concern, two or more board members can address the individuals involved.

IV. Dealing with Prejudice

There are many types of controversy that NA's are confronted with but one of the trickiest and potentially most harmful is when prejudice and biases are involved. This can be issues that involve the interests of people of color, people with disabilities (including mental illness), renters rights or people on parole and or probation.

It is important to keep in mind that people's intent is one thing. The impact is another.

How to Interrupt Prejudiced Comments

Hold people accountable who make prejudicial comments at a neighborhood meeting. This is one of the most important things that you can do to create an environment that is welcoming to all people. Often one may be caught off guard when a racist, homophobic, or sexist comment occurs and you're not sure how to respond. But if you don't challenge comments - then and there - people will take notice, especially newer participants who may not return to a second Association activity.

When you are facilitating a large group the best response to biased or prejudiced comments is: "I need you to rephrase that."

As the facilitator:

- Remember, that someone has to be doing clear thinking on the subject. Assume it is you.
- Respond non-judgmentally.
- Ask questions. Find out how they arrived at their thinking.
- Ask questions that lead them to reflect and rethink on what they said.
- Give them more or new information (most prejudiced comments are spoken out of ignorance).
- Think about the ways they might have been a target of prejudice. Stay within their experience of being targeted with prejudice.
- Be playful, keep it light, but don't let them off the hook.
- Avoid arguments. You don't want to alienate them. You actually want them to get closer to you as an ally (supporter).
- Avoid making people feel ashamed, humiliated, or embarrassed. Your goal is to clarify their intent and set them straight with new information.
- People don't have to admit they are wrong, so don't push them for an admission.
- All this takes practice – it never comes out perfect the first time – but you only get better by doing it.

When prejudiced comments are made, try the following....

- “I’m sure you didn’t mean to offend, but you did, and let me tell you why...”
- “What you just said could be perceived as racially biased.”
- “I’m going to interrupt what you’re saying because I find it offensive.”
- “Where did you get that information?”
- “What do you mean when you say ...” (i.e. The Arabs and Japanese are buying up the U.S.)
- Just say “OUCH!”
- “Did you know that members of that group find that hurtful?”
- “Do you believe what you just said?”
- “Do you realize what you’ve said?”
- “I don’t think you meant that, but how I felt was...”

Interrupting Prejudiced Comments, Adapted with permission from *Technical Assistance for Community Services*, (503) 239-4001, www.tacs.org

When even your best efforts fail...

Crowds are unpredictable and even the best planned meetings go awry. When this happens consider the following:

- Debrief soon after the meeting so you can think about what went well and where there were problems.
- Don’t be afraid to close a meeting that has become unmanageable. It’s perfectly fine to announce that the meeting is not proceeding in an appropriate way and that you will reconvene when people are ready for a more orderly meeting.
- Recognize when meeting attendees have been hurt or alienated during a meeting and reach out to them. It is very helpful to give people a chance to talk about what happened to them and why they had a bad experience. When appropriate it’s also helpful to apologize for the bad experience they had at meeting.

***“When controversy comes to your neighborhood:
Tips and Tools”***

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Differences of opinion and perspective and even conflict are natural and expected within neighborhoods. But sometimes issues come before Neighborhood Associations (NA) and Coalitions that involve a high level of controversy. These situations have the potential to become extremely heated and to create deep fractures in the community.

This handbook contains tips and tools that have been found to be helpful in navigating challenging and controversial neighborhood issues to maximize opportunity and minimize damage to the relationships in the community.