

ARTICLE 9

Citizen's Involvement

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IN A DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, government gains its legitimacy exclusively from “the people.” The most visible way this occurs is through periodic elections of representatives at all levels of government. However, a more regular form of citizen influence is communicating to those representatives—and to others in government—criticisms, preferences, and even demands about what should be done to create a better community, state, and nation. In the U.S. Constitution, citizen involvement is part of the First Amendment, “the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

In this article, several aspects of citizen involvement in local government in North Carolina are presented. First the tension between the philosophical and practical value of an involved citizenry for North Carolina cities and counties is examined. This includes the commonly cited weaknesses and problems of citizen involvement at the local level. Next, the state law requirements for citizen involvement are described. Other articles (primarily Article 8) present the law governing open meetings, hearings, and documents. Third, particular ways for government officials seeking to involve citizens are explained. Most attention is given to two common formal methods of citizen involvement: public hearings and appointed citizen boards. However, other means of outreach and response, including ways created by e-mail, the Internet, and other telecommunications advances, are covered. The article closes with a description of local government employees’ responsibilities for fostering citizen involvement.

Before turning to those topics, reflecting on a few passages in North Carolina Constitution about citizens and government forms the basis of political philosophy about the importance of government’s responsiveness to citizens. Article I, Declaration of Rights, Section 2, *Sovereignty of the people*, of the North Carolina Constitution reads “All political power is vested in and derived from the people; all government of right originates from the people, is founded upon their will only, and is instituted solely for the good of the whole.” Later in the same article, Section 3, *Internal government of the State*, begins “The people of this State have the inherent, sole, and exclusive right of regulating the internal government and police thereof” and of altering or abolishing their Constitution and form of government whenever it may be necessary to their safety and happiness; but every such right shall be exercised in pursuance of law and consistently with the Constitution of the United States. Finally, similar to the U.S. Constitution, Section 12 is the *Right of assembly and petition*, “The people have a right to assemble together to consult for their common good, to instruct their representatives, and to apply to the General Assembly for redress of grievances; but secret political societies are dangerous to the liberties of a free people and shall not be tolerated.”

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These passages serve as a useful reminder that citizen involvement beyond campaigns and elections is a bedrock principle of governance in North Carolina. These very basic rights lead to several questions and concerns about the exercise of those rights, and local government's responsibilities and conundrums on the day-to-day matters of citizen involvement.

Citizen Involvement: Low Voting and Common Reasons for Lack of Engagement

For some, the most appropriate type of public participation in government is through the electoral process. For others, elections are seen as just the beginning of an interactive relationship between government officials and citizens. Even under the former, broader idea, data are not encouraging in terms of the level of public participation. According to the North Carolina State Board of Elections, in 2004, only 85 percent of the voting age population was registered to vote. The level of participation in actual elections is much lower. General elections, which involve candidates from state and national levels, tend to have higher levels of voter turnout. Elections where presidential candidates are involved have the highest. However, even in the years of presidential elections, the percent of voting age population actually casting a vote hovers around 50 percent.

Why do citizens not participate? Low voter turnout can be explained by four main reasons: (1) a sense of disconnect with government, (2) lack of time, (3) lack of encouragement or support from government, and (4) factors specific to the issue at hand, either its complexity or long-range focus.

First, citizens may not feel as though they are associated with government. This can run the range from alienation to distrust to apathy. In the worst case, government is seen as actively discouraging citizen involvement. Citizens treat relations with government in an "us-versus-them" way. Slightly better is the idea that government may not be the enemy, but it is not to be trusted, either because the people who work for the government are incompetent or government employees are actively biased against individual citizens.

What is far more common and disturbing is the sense of apathy toward government. A 1999 bipartisan survey conducted by the Council for Excellence in Government (a private group promoting improved performance in government and public understanding of government work) asked 1,200 people whether government reflected the value of being "of, by, and for the people." Only 39 percent agreed.

This apathy may be an important reason for low voter turn-outs. Individuals may feel that a single vote does not matter (although the contested presidential election of 2000 went a long way toward countering this view). Others may feel the local, state, or national situation is beyond hope, or conversely, that all is well with the world. In either case, one may feel that voting for one candidate over another will not result in a major change—that "my single vote will not matter." Another view is that candidates are too similar, and again, choosing one over the other doesn't make a difference. The presidential election in 2004 demonstrated an exception to the tradition of voter apathy, with the highest voter turnout in decades. However, even in this landmark election, only 55 percent of the voting age population in North Carolina cast ballots.

Second, people may cite lack of time as a reason for not voting. Lack of time may not be the true issue, however. In some cases, citizens are not able to reach polling places when they are open. Extended polling place hours, multiple locations, early voting experiments, and efforts to extend voting by mail and electronically have all tried to address accessibility problems with voting. Lack of time may also be another version of voter apathy—if many priorities demand attention and one perceives voting in the election has little impact, then it is not a surprise that waiting in line at a polling place is not top on one's daily agenda.

Third, does the public feel as though government officials are making a clear and conscience effort to encourage and support citizen participation? Often, for government employees, the image of an "involved citizen" is an irate citizen. The reality may be very different, but local government officials tend to prepare for citizen involvement as if it was a problem, and citizens are aware of this image. Anecdotes suggest that if a citizen makes an appointment with a city manager, it is probably not to compliment the local government on a job well done. There are numerous ways in which local government actions can be transparent, so that the public has an opportunity to be aware of issues. If the public perceives its involvement as unwelcome, it is not surprising that participation is lacking.

Fourth, some issues do not connect with or may seem beyond the understanding of most citizens. By this we mean that the issue at hand may be complex, such as municipal cable television ownership property rights, or they may seem too distant or indirect to bring a sense of immediacy to the decision-making process. For example, a proposal to build

a big-box retail store may elicit more citizen response, positive or negative, because it is immediate and may appear to be simple, than a discussion of a community's long-term land use plan for stormwater drainage, which may appear to be complex and far-off in the future.

The reasons mentioned above are mostly citizen-oriented. One could similarly ask why governments seek or do not seek greater citizen involvement. Commonly cited reasons would mirror those above. In various training sessions conducted with government employees through the Institute of Government at the School of Government, participants were quick to cite reasons why they do not seek high levels of citizen participation.

Government officials often anticipate apathy or distrust. Encouraging public participation takes time and resources, with uncertain payoffs. The attitude may be, "Why invite trouble?" As some citizens distrust government, and some government officials distrust portions of the public. Unless value is seen in involving citizens, officials do not pursue it.

A commonly cited reason for lack of government efforts is simply a lack of sufficient resources to provide adequate administrative support, information, and understanding. It is not uncommon for public hearings to be organized, staffed, and held, yet very few or no citizens attend. If this occurs, government may be less motivated to spend even more resources to pursue "an unwilling partner." For example, for many years Raleigh distributed a questionnaire through local media and its Web page asking for citizen input on budget priorities. In 1999, the *News and Observer* featured a story on the lack of response. A city employee remarked, "Usually, only 15 or 20 people bother answering the questionnaire. . . . This year is no exception. As of last week (December 21), only 6 people had sent in their budgetary suggestions. Two of the respondents do not even live in Raleigh. It would be nice to get more responses. . . . We actually do factor them into the budget process."

Some officials mentioned frustration because the issues involved were complex, and extensive time and effort were required to educate the public before citizens could meaningfully participate in decision making. In other cases, government officials said they feared raising expectations that may not be met. Opening up the policy-making process means giving up, or "losing," some control.

Finally, there is a lack of information on practical, efficient, and successful ways to involve citizens. In a 1998–99 survey, North Carolina local government officials were asked about how they involved citizens in the budget process, since this is one of the most common areas in which citizen participation is required. Of the approximately one-third of cities that responded, less than one-half made any effort to involve citizens beyond the state-mandated public hearing. Slightly over one-half of counties responded to the survey. Of those, less than a third went beyond the mandated public hearing. Discretionary efforts to involve the public are not particularly widespread. However, there are many notable exceptions, in both large and small jurisdictions.

Durham, for example, has had a history of trying various ways to involve the public in the budget process. In the past decade, Durham used what they termed *citizen public hearings* in January or February at the beginning of the normal budget preparation time. Information on the hearings and services covered by the city budget were advertised in local papers. A clip-out coupon was offered for citizens to list their priorities and mail to the budget office. Over time, the response to the coupons tapered off, but Durham maintains the use of at least two public hearings on the budget—one early and one later in the process. Durham also uses more informal methods, such as "Coffees with Council" in February and March, where interested groups invite members of the city council to visit, and staff attends to answer questions.

Of all the options available for reaching citizens, do we know of "best practices" to incorporate citizen input in a meaningful fashion? As displayed in Tables 9-1 and 9-2, in the 1998–99 survey, government officials were asked what they felt was the *least* effective way to involve citizens. The most common answer, not surprisingly, was public hearings. However, the most common answer to the question of what is the *most* effective way to involve citizens was also public hearings! Obviously there is something other than the specific method that helps make citizen involvement a positive or negative experience. The results of this survey suggest that using the chosen method early in the decision-making process, and repeatedly throughout the process, generated the most meaningful participation, at least from the local government officials' perspective.

For local governments, what are the costs in not having citizens involved in the process? Can government accurately identify citywide or countywide public priorities without involving citizens in some way? Informally, officials cite the political and practical dangers in an inadvertent mismatch between public and government priorities. While interest groups may participate, there remains a "silent majority" of citizens who do not even vote in elections, let alone participate in hearings or other events. This includes those who are satisfied with government service, those unable or unwilling to voice their opinion, and those too discouraged to participate.

Table 9-1. Most Effective Methods to Involve Citizens

| Method | % Cities (n = 106) | % Counties (n = 17) |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Public hearings (mandated or otherwise) | 26 | 24 |
| Special open meetings (town meetings) | 15 | 18 |
| Opportunities to speak at regular meetings | 18 | 18 |
| Citizen advisory boards | 11 | 0 |
| Mail-in coupons | 1 | 0 |
| Coffeehouse conversations | 8 | 4 |
| Surveys | 12 | 0 |
| Websites/e-mail | 0 | 6 |
| Visits to local civic groups | 8 | 6 |
| Visits to neighborhood associations | 5 | 0 |
| Contact initiated by citizens | 2 | 0 |
| Other | 6 | 6 |

Source: Berner, Maureen M. Citizen Participation in Local Government Budgeting. *Popular Government* Spring 2001, pp. 23–30.

Table 9-2. Least Effective Methods to Involve Citizens

| Method | % Cities (n = 89) | % Counties (n = 14) |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Public hearings (mandated or otherwise) | 61 | 57 |
| Special open meetings (town meetings) | 8 | 0 |
| Opportunities to speak at regular meetings | 9 | 0 |
| Citizen advisory boards | 2 | |
| Mail-in coupons | 2 | 14 |
| Coffeehouse conversations | 7 | 14 |
| Surveys | 5 | 14 |
| Websites/e-mail | 2 | 7 |
| Visits to local civic groups | 1 | 0 |
| Visits to neighborhood associations | 0 | 0 |
| Contact initiated by citizens | 2 | 0 |
| Other | 0 | 0 |

Source: Berner, Maureen M. Citizen Participation in Local Government Budgeting. *Popular Government* Spring 2001, pp. 23–30.

For the local governments involved, what are the benefits of participation? First, at a minimum level, participation means sharing information. One of the benefits cited by local government officials is an increased understanding of problems and possible solutions. By better understanding citizen problems and priorities, better decisions can be made. For example, active communication with citizens can tell you if a particular policy option is feasible. Acceptance and support of decisions should also be easier to achieve.

But are we trading off efficiency for effectiveness? After all, efforts to more fully involve the public take time and resources. The resulting decision may be more effective, but the process leading to that decision may not be an easy or quick one. However, from a cost-benefit perspective, having better and more popular decisions may outweigh the significant costs involved in increasing citizen participation. Efficiency might even improve as a result. On the other hand, it may not. There is no current research on the actual impact, costs, or benefits of various forms of public participation. Efficiency and effectiveness are only two values underlying a government decision-making process. As mentioned above, citizen participation is also a fundamental democratic value in North Carolina, and the response to the question of why instigate, continue, or expand efforts to involve the public in local government falls back on values and a philosophical view of the appropriate relationship between citizens and government.

Legal Requirements

As mentioned above, *participation* is a broad term. By state law, the main requirement for local government in terms of participation is that an opportunity be available for members of the public to see the decision-making process through open meetings and comment on government actions. Open meetings law, reviewed in Article 8, covers the responsibilities of government officials to allow the public notice and access to meetings in which public decisions are made. Open records law, also reviewed in Article 8, covers the responsibilities of government to make documents related to government activities available for public review. Both of these sets of laws focus on the public's access to government information.

In return, what are the responsibilities of government to gather information on the public's views of government decisions? The only broad-brush responsibility is for local government to solicit public comment, usually through a public hearing. There are many instances where public hearings are held. Some of these instances are very common, such as rezonings in cities, annexations, and in both city and county budget processes. Sometimes the laws requiring a public hearing are relatively obscure, as in the case of the adoption of an ordinance to franchise ambulance services (G.S. 153A-250) or for any changes to the schedule of stormwater charges (although hearings are not required for other enterprises or water/sewer charge changes [G.S. 160A-314(a1)(1) and G.S. 153A-277(a1)(1) for cities and counties respectively]). Whether or not a public hearing, or any other type of public involvement, is necessary depends on the particular issue or action. It is wise to research the legal requirements for citizen notification and involvement in each case. A listing of public hearings required for cities can be found in the School of Government publication *North Carolina City Council Procedures*. For specific public hearing requirements for counties, contact Maureen M. Berner, a county attorney, or the relevant faculty at the School of Government.

With one important and recent exception, there are no legal requirements for cities or counties on how a hearing must be held, except as directed by policies adopted by the government in question. The exception involves general public comment periods at regular meetings of city councils, boards of county commissioners, and school boards.

In 2005, the N.C. General Assembly enacted S.L. 2005-170 (H 635), which mandates that city councils, boards of county commissioners, and boards of education provide at least one period for public comment per month at a regular meeting of the board.¹ The history of the act, as well as case law on citizen comment periods as "limited public forums" under the First Amendment, both suggest that the board probably must allow comment on *any subject* that is within the jurisdiction of the local government.

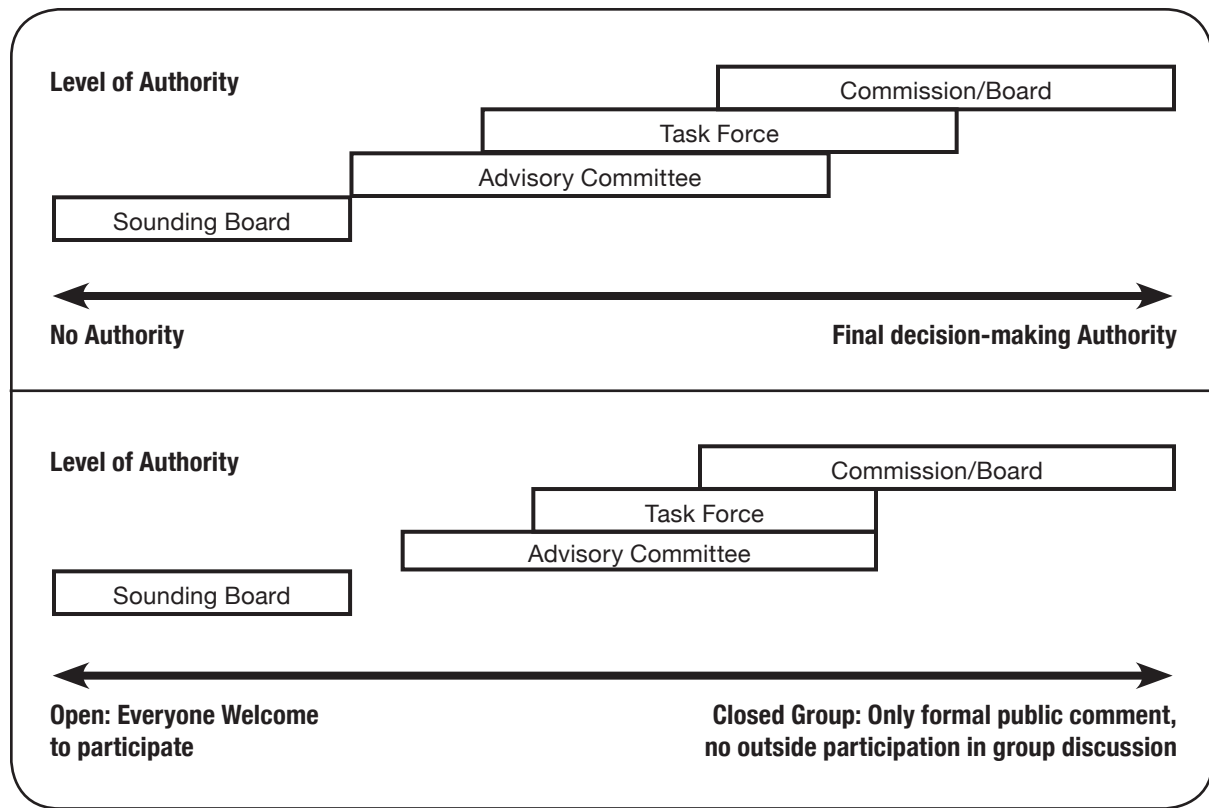
However, a board can adopt reasonable regulations governing the conduct of the public comment period, including but not limited to rules setting time limits for speakers, and providing for (1) the designation of spokesmen for groups supporting or opposing the same position, (2) the selection of delegates from groups with the same position when the meeting hall's capacity is exceeded, and (3) the maintenance of order and decorum in the conduct of the hearing. This authorization of regulations is taken almost verbatim from earlier statutes governing the conduct of public hearings by counties and municipalities, respectively (G.S. 153A-52 and G.S. 160A-81).

There are also recommendations on how to conduct a meeting to best facilitate participation, if that is an objective. Recommendations on meeting procedure and conduct are discussed below, and can be found in Article 8. Guidance on public comment periods concerning the law and discretion on structure and management is available from the School of Government.²

North Carolina is not alone in its lack of laws requiring public participation. For example, nationally, forty states require public hearings on the budget for cities, and forty-two states require public hearings for county budgets. Far fewer must actually make the budget available for review, let alone involve the public in any other way. Public participation is usually encouraged, to greater or lesser extents, rather than mandated. Given that, we return to the question, *if* a local government wanted to involve the public, what would be the best approach?

1. If there is not a scheduled meeting of the board, there is no obligation to have a public comment period. The requirement is "once a month" contingent on the board having a meeting in that month.

2. See John Stephens, and A. Fleming Bell, II, "Public Comment at Business Meetings of Local Government Boards, Part One: Guidelines for Good Practices," *Popular Government* 62, 4 (Summer, 1997): 2-14; and A. Fleming Bell, II, John Stephens, and Christopher Bass, "Public Comment at Business Meetings of Local Government Boards, Part Two: Common Practices and Legal Standards," *Popular Government* 63, 1 (Fall, 1997): 27-37.

Figure 9-1. *Levels of Authority*

Source: Jeanne Lawson, "Choosing a Format for Public Advisory Groups," *Participation Quarterly* (December 1994). Published by International Association for Public Participation.

Ways to Involve Citizens

We now turn to particular avenues in which citizens are involved, and how municipal and county government leaders in North Carolina seek citizens to be involved in community affairs. The two most formal, traditional means are presented: *public hearings* and appointed *citizen boards*. Newspapers and radio are discussed as the most accessible broadcast media relevant to local government and citizen involvement. Finally, the more recent growth of websites and blogs as forms of interaction with citizens are explored.

To illustrate the context of public hearings and citizen advisory boards, Figure 9-1 shows that elections are the means by which power is invested in representatives to take authoritative action for a town or county.

Such actions are individual and private, but the cumulative result is the "voice of the people." On the other end, individual citizen contact with their representatives by phone, at a grocery store, restaurant, or other venue allows "involvement" in informal and one-on-one settings. Appointed committee and public hearings sit between the one-on-one contact and elections as part of the formal work of the elected board to make decisions.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are a long-standing way in which municipal and county elected boards set up a formal process to hear from citizens. As was described in the legal requirements section, some actions of local government can only occur after a public hearing is held. However, boards of county commissioners (BOCCs) and city councils (CCs)³ can

3. Municipal governing bodies have different titles, such as Board of Aldermen, or Town Council. We use "city council" in reference to all municipal elected boards in North Carolina.

convene hearings for any matter they wish (other than for matters held in closed meetings). Hearings can occur as a single agenda item among other matters considered at a governing board's regular business meeting, or can be held as separate meetings.

In a typical public hearing, citizens are asked to address a topic, question, or proposal being considered by an appointed citizen board, or by the top legislative body (i.e., the BOCC or CC). There may already be a draft ordinance or written policy proposal, and citizens' opinions are solicited on those matters. Alternatively, the issue could be a more general matter of current interest.

Boards typically regulate the topic, how long people speak, and the order into which citizens speak. Otherwise, there are no legal standards to meet, and wide variation in length of the hearing, whether people speak for themselves or for a group, whether the hearing is "pro forma" with few or no speakers, or whether the hearing draws a large crowd and speakers express strong emotions.

As a matter of fairness, hearings usually reserve equal time (or at least equal opportunity to speak) for proponents and opponents of a draft ordinance. A common approach is to create alternating pro and con speakers until all of one side has had all its speakers, and then the other side may have consecutive speakers. Frequently, however, opponents outnumber proponents. As noted above, a common complaint about public hearings is that a few vocal naysayers attend, and many other citizens who quietly agree with a draft ordinance stay home. This can leave the impression, especially when reported by newspaper or other media, that the majority of citizens in a community are in opposition.

Another common approach is to ask citizens wishing to speak to sign up in advance, usually on a sheet in the meeting room shortly before the hearing begins. Again, there is wide variation in North Carolina and great informality if the gathering is small, and the BOCC's or CC's meeting culture is not formal in its approach in how citizens address them. A related benefit of sign-up sheets is that the government may be able to identify active citizens when it is seeking volunteers for citizen positions on boards or commissions. A possible detriment of this practice is that recording names, issues, positions, or contact information may inhibit some individuals from speaking.

Because there are no strictures on the format for many kinds of public hearings⁴ BOCCs and CCs may employ other approaches for receiving citizen input during public hearings. For example, one variation on public hearings on a particular topic is *public forum meetings* or other special outreach or hearinglike events, where citizens' questions and comments are the centerpiece of the occasion. An example from Ocean Isle Beach:

Open Forum Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month in February, April, September, and November at 6:00 p.m. in the Betty S. Williamson Meeting Hall. These meetings are held for the purpose of providing the public a forum to discuss issues and ask questions to the Board of Commissioners and the Town Staff.

Some other formats for meetings that satisfy hearing goals are noted in Sidebar 9-1.

The fundamental objective is to provide citizens fair and equal access, in a public meeting, to express their views and have them heard and recorded by the BOCC, CC, or a body that reports to the local elected governing board. What usually distinguishes hearings from other forms of citizen involvement is that the hearing is structured as part of the board's decision-making process when consideration of a particular action is pending.

Appointed Citizen Boards

The second most common form of structured citizen involvement is when BOCCs and CCs appoint members of the community to committees, boards, or commissions. Although these bodies go by many titles, we refer to this class as an "appointed citizen board" (ACB).⁵ Most often, the ACBs are formed by and operate at the discretion of a single BOCC or CC. A handful of ACBs must follow state legal requirements on membership and duties: county social service, health, and county or regional mental health (MH/DD/SA) boards are the most prominent in this category. Occasionally, the federal government can require citizen participation as a condition of receiving federal

4. However, actions by boards of adjustment occur as a quasi-judicial public hearing. For details on rules for some public hearings, see Article 25, Community Planning, Land Use, and Development.

5. Elected boards for cities and counties have full or partial control over a wide variety of boards. These boards vary by powers and scope of work. Many are advisory and have little influence over resources, and modest to moderate influence over policies or personnel. Several of these boards have oversight or policy-making power for departments, agencies, or programs and some make regulatory decisions. Here we emphasize that regardless of their powers, they are appointed rather than elected boards.

Sidebar 9-1. *Formats for Meetings That Satisfy Public Hearing Goals*

1. Comments and/or questions submitted in writing at the meeting, and responses made by LG staff or elected board.
 2. Polling the room—seeking views based on particular questions, especially if there is more than one proposal being considered, or there are particular changes sought in a draft ordinance/plan/policy.
 3. Splitting the audience into small groups for “kitchen-table” style discussion, which can allow for more people to speak, in a more informal way, and have give-and-take conversation with LG staff or elected board members
 4. BOCC or CC convene meetings in different parts of the community—moving away from its regular meeting place—as a way to be more accessible to citizens in certain neighborhoods.
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Source: Debra Henzey, John B. Stephens, and Patrick Liedtka. “Listening to Citizens: County Commissioners on the Road,” *Popular Government*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Institute of Government, The University of North Carolina: Spring 1999), 17–28.

funds. Localities can choose to satisfy that requirement by hearings or other forms, but an ACB is a common response. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development requires that recipients of its funds, most notably community development block grants, develop and follow a detailed citizen participation plan (24 CFR § 91.225).

Common city-appointed citizen boards include: parks and recreation, planning, and zoning board of adjustment. For larger communities, other typical bodies address greenways and/or open space, alcoholic beverage control, downtown revitalization, and public housing.

The most common county ACBs are health, social service, planning, jury commissions, and regional mental health boards. Many counties also make appointments to a wide variety of boards: transportation, airport authorities, adult care homes, juvenile crime prevention councils, nursing homes, volunteer fire department/fire district commissions; community college boards; councils on aging, tourism and/or convention and visitors panels; among others.⁶

Some boards have appointments from more than one local government jurisdiction. Economic development boards commonly receive their members by appointment from separate towns and the county. For example, in Perquimans County, the Economic Development Commission’s nine members come from separate appointments by the towns of Winfall and Hertford, and by the Perquimans Board of County Commissioners.

Other regional bodies draw from a wider set of appointments. The most common is the regional mental health/mental retardation/developmental disabilities boards, which typically take in several counties in all but the most populous areas of the state. Another example comes from operation of a regional utility: the Perquimans/Chowan/Gates Landfill Committee have members from each county.

Some board and commission seats require designated skills or training set by law or regulation. Examples include historic preservation or architectural review boards, where architects or others of particular professional expertise have one or more seats reserved on the board. At one extreme is a state law designating membership of an eleven-member county board of health. The collective membership must include a doctor, a dentist, a veterinarian, a registered nurse, an optometrist, a pharmacist, a professional engineer, a county commissioner, and three members of the general public. The members of a county board of health must also “reasonably reflect the population make-up of the jurisdiction” (see G.S. 130A-35 and 130A-37).

The number of ACBs typically varies in relation to the size of the city or county, but not always.⁷ Some North Carolina cities have very few advisory boards. Examples of those with six or less ACBs (using 2006 data) are:

6. The common kinds of boards are drawn from the authors’ review of North Carolina city and county government websites, Stephens’ 1997–98 informal study of citizen boards in the state, and our consultation with county and city leaders and employees.

7. An initial e-mail survey of North Carolina city and county clerks was conducted in 2002. This information was updated in 2006 by review of city and county websites and telephone interviews.

Table 9-3. Citizen Advisory Boards—Powers and Responsibilities

| Higher levels |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Render binding decisions [board of adjustment] • Make policy that can be and changed reviewed by elected board [planning board], review ongoing programs [social services] • Hire/fire staff [social services, mental health] • Hear appeals |
| Lower levels |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hear complaints • Be a sounding board [among different viewpoints on the board, or for citizens to make presentations] • Make recommendations [At board's initiative vs. At direction of elected board to address a particular problem] |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town of Haw River (1) Planning and Zoning/Adjustment • City of Laurinburg (3) Board of Adjustments; Planning Board; Cable Committee • Weaverville (4) Tree Board; Appearance Commission; Zoning; Adjustment • Town of Garner (5) Board of Adjustment; Planning Commission; Parks and Recreation; Senior Citizens; Garner Revitalization Association • Elkin (6) Alcoholic Beverage Commission Board; Airport; Library; Parks and Recreation; Main Street; Planning Board/Board of Adjustment |

Turning to counties, several of the more populous counties have dozens of ACBs, but one smaller county, Northampton, has over thirty-five ACBs (using 2006 data):⁸

- Charlotte/Mecklenburg County (43) <http://www.charmeck.org/Departments/BOCC/Advisory+Boards/Home.htm>
- Guilford County (56) <http://gcms0004.co.guilford.nc.us/commissioners/boards.php>
- Pitt County (55) <http://www.co.pitt.nc.us/bcc/boards/>
- Orange County (36) <http://www.co.orange.nc.us/>
- Northampton County (38) <http://www.northamptonnc.com/documents/boards/Boards%20Committees%20and%20Commissions%20Table%20of%20Contents.pdf>

The number of ACBs is not indicative of the importance of citizen involvement to a particular jurisdiction, or reflective of the opportunities for citizens to be involved. Factors that go into establishing ACBs include the interest and ability of the top governing board (BOCC or CC) to address issues in-depth, the staff and other resources to support the operations of ACBs, and the availability of interested and qualified citizens to serve on ACBs.

When considering forming and managing ACBs, the following framework may be helpful. Five factors distinguish the nature of ACBs: substance of work, geographic reach, powers and responsibilities, duration and permanence, and membership. These five factors are explained in more detail below.

1. *Substance of the work.* The first and easiest factor is the subjects on which the ACB works. The “what does it address” question is often answered in the name of the ACB. Some of the most common substantive areas are social services, planning and zoning, transportation, environmental protection, neighborhood/community development, senior citizen services, parks and recreation, cemetery, and juries among others.
2. *Geographic reach.* As noted above, most frequently the geographic area of concern is the city or county jurisdiction of the governing board. However, as was also noted, it is common to have ACBs addressing city-county, region, or state government–local government matters.
3. *Powers and responsibilities.* Local governments' ACBs vary significantly in terms of authority and duties. Almost all serve as a venue where concerns, complaints, and proposals are heard, or are referred by the governing body for detailed consideration and a recommendation for action. However, as Table 9-3 shows,

8. All websites were accessed in February 2006.

greater powers for some boards include hiring, firing, and evaluation of a top staff member (e.g., Social Service Director, Health Director), rule-making and adjudicatory authority (e.g., local board of health), and reaching binding decisions that can only be reviewed by a court (e.g., board of adjustment).

4. *Duration and permanence.* BOCCs and CCs have powers to appoint temporary task forces, study groups, or committees where citizen involvement is important. These single-topic bodies are intended to be of short duration. On the other side, there are many standing ACBs, often due to ongoing interest in subjects such as community planning and economic development, the local government budget, parks and recreation, mental health, social services, and the like. Standing, ongoing committees are often set by local ordinance and require no renewal. Several are controlled by state law, such that the BOCC or CC cannot abolish them. The short-term committees usually are set by passage of a motion specifying the focus and a time limit for completing work with a recommendation for which the BOCC or CC to act upon.
5. *Membership.* Most people—one important exception on age are youth committees—are eligible to serve on ACBs by simply being an adult resident of the town or county. However, this is not a strict qualification: BOCCs and CCs are not restricted by state law to select residents of their communities, and nonresidents are common on boards. Some localities may only appoint people who are U.S. citizens or who are registered to vote. In particular, county social service boards only require that the member be a “bona fide resident of the county from which they are appointed to serve.” It is common for BOCC and CC members (and/or other government employees) to recruit people in order to fill seats on certain ACBs. Thus anyone who is interested and willing to serve is often deemed acceptable. However, some boards have categories of membership that must be satisfied (as described above). Membership of ACBs requires formal appointment by the BOCC or CC. It is not unusual for ACBs to recommend people to fill vacancies, and such transitions may include citizens attending and participating in some ways prior to the formal action by the BOCC or CC. In some instances, the ACB empowers staff to have a significant role in selection and management of ACB membership.

Although there are many variations, Lawson⁹ offers four types of ACBs: sound board, advisory committee, task force, and commission/board. The purpose of a *sounding board* is to solicit views on a topic or proposal. It is not intended to reach consensus or give a specific recommendation. The membership is open, and its duration is normally short to medium term. The *advisory committee*, as its name implies, advises decision makers on issues, options, and so forth, and serves as a liaison to a neighborhood, constituency, or business group. The membership is officially appointed, and it is of medium-term or ongoing duration.

A *task force* focuses on an issue-specific recommendation for action or detailed evaluation of alternatives. Its membership is officially appointed and is often smaller than an advisory committee. Its duration can vary greatly. While it is normally temporary, it could be in place for short, medium, or longer term. Finally, a *commission or board* has the most variety of purpose and can range across any of the other three types. It is of ongoing duration, and its members are officially appointed. Oftentimes in North Carolina it has the greatest level of responsibility, some or all of which are spelled out by state law and local ordinance. The difference by degree of open participation and by level of authority among these four types is conveyed in Figure 9-2.

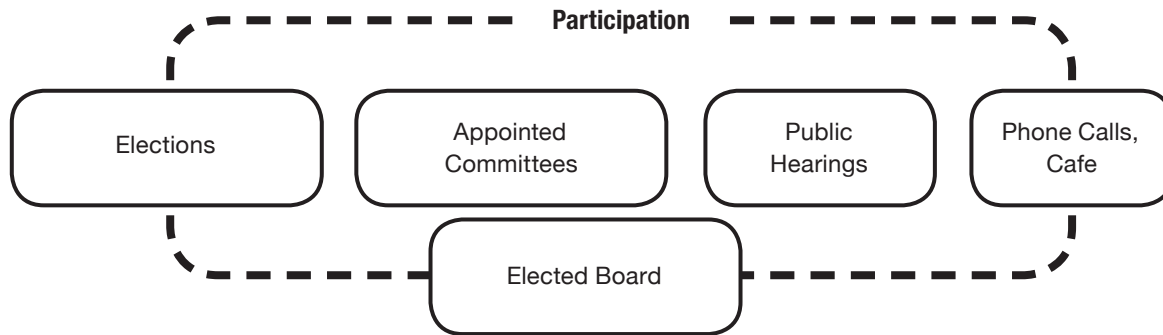
Media: Television, Radio, Print

Beyond public hearings and ACBs, which allow for one-time or multiple-meeting ways for face-to-face communication among citizens and between citizens and local government leaders, print and electronic media are a way that local governments try to reach and involve citizens and provide a way for citizens to express their views.

Ranging from the letter to the editor in a weekly or daily newspaper to the government access television channels active in many communities, radio, print, and television media offer several ways for citizens to be involved. First, citizens can observe their representatives at work in public meetings through government access cable television channels and, rarely, via live radio broadcasts. This is passive participation, admittedly, but is one important basis for

9. Jeanne Lawson, “Choosing a Format for Public Advisory Groups,” *Participation Quarterly* (December 1994). Published by International Association for Public Participation.

Figure 9-2. Levels of Participation



Source: Jeanne Lawson, “Choosing a Format for Public Advisory Groups,” *Participation Quarterly* (December 1994). Published by International Association for Public Participation.

citizens to be informed and move to active forms of involvement. About one-quarter of the 100 county commissions and many towns with populations of 25,000 and more have their regular meetings televised through a government access channel, or a shared public access/government access cable channel.¹⁰

Second, radio call-in programs offer citizens a way to speak to and question local government officials. Third, local governments place advertisements or public service announcements through radio and newspapers to announce openings on ACBs, the dates and times of public hearings, and other ways for citizens to be aware of government operations and current issues.

Particular/Special Efforts: Citizen Surveys, Community Visioning

Citizens can observe and interact with local government through print and other media on a regular basis. Occasionally, local governments make particular, one-time, or infrequent, efforts to actively seek public input. One common way is through citizen surveys. In 2000, a report published by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) suggested that nationwide, each year, more than 230 communities with a population greater than 25,000 use citizen surveys. Surveys can be very useful for gathering information from the public. They offer (a) the ability to gather direct, and often quantifiable, answers to questions; (b) anonymity and therefore hopefully a larger and more honest response; and (c) randomness, which means you tend to obtain a true cross-section of views from the public.

However, surveys are limited—they do not provide for direct or contemporaneous interaction with government officials. They require specific questions, not an open discussion. They are infrequent. Surveys are usually not done on an annual basis because of the cost. Costs vary significantly, depending on whether a survey is conducted by mail, phone, Internet, or in-person. Type and size of sample, survey length, and in-house or external labor also affect cost. It is not unreasonable for a survey of the general public in a mid-sized community to cost between 10–20,000 dollars.¹¹

An increasingly common feature of periodic citizen involvement relates to *community visioning* or *strategic planning*. These efforts typically tackle how to set long-term goals for a city, county, or region. Often a task force of 6–12 months duration works to involve a wide range of viewpoints in the community and gain “buy-in” by active involve-

10. County data provided by Todd McGee, Director of Communications, N.C. Association of County Commissioners (e-mail exchange of February 21, 2006). His survey yielded 72 responses, 27 of which indicated that their meetings are televised. Municipal information came from an interview with Beau Mills, Director of Intergovernmental Relations for the N.C. Metropolitan Coalition, N.C. League of Municipalities (March 2, 2006).

11. For details on conducting citizen surveys, including local government examples around North Carolina, see “So You Want to Do a Survey...” by Maureen M. Berner, Ashley Bowers, and Laura Heyman in *Popular Government* (Summer 2002): 23–32.

Sidebar 9-2. Example of Community Visioning Process

A volunteer leads a group of 100 citizens at an all-day visioning session.

Kannapolis citizens weave a shared vision

By Eleanore J. Hajian

In 1998, Kannapolis leaders had a tough dilemma. They had to figure out how to inspire residents to participate in civic life and support their city government in a former mill town with a strong tradition of corporate paternalism.

Kannapolis had endured as the largest unincorporated city in the country (population nearly 30,000) until 1984. Prior to that, Cannon Mills provided water and sewer services, police and fire protection, roads and recreational amenities. The mill also maintained 1,600 company-owned homes and employed most of the town's residents. The corporate paternalism came to a screeching halt when the mill changed ownership in the early 80s, but its legacy continued. Two years ago that legacy began to change as city leaders began a visioning process that drew hundreds of residents.

Last month, that visioning process received the Program Excellence Award for Citizen Involvement at the International City/County Management Association conference

in Cincinnati, OH. The award recognizes successful strategies designed to inform citizens about local government services and include them in the decision-making process. ICMA presented the award in the 50,000 and under population category to the city and to City Manager David Hales and Assistant City Manager Greg McGinnis.

Weaving A Shared Future, Kannapolis' 18-month visioning process held from May 1998 to October 1999, established a vision center on Main Street where citizens spent more than 1,000 volunteer hours sharing their memories, ideas and dreams for their city. More than 100 volunteers chaired and participated in committees designated as live, work, learn and play. The four committees were charged with finding solutions to the issues Kannapolis faced. The result: a strategic plan to strengthen neighborhoods, add recreational facilities and attract new business to the city. But Kannapolis gained

much more than a good plan, said McGinnis, who served as vision coordinator. "Prior to this visioning process a lot of our residents never really had the opportunity to have a say in what they want the town to be," he said. "It was a citizen-led process. When we had the final presentation of the plan at least 500 people came, and it got a standing ovation from the community."

It's an award the city can be proud of, said Mayor Ray Moss.

"Because of the hundreds of people who participated in Weaving a Shared Future, we have a vision that will carry us for the next 15 to 20 years and a strategic plan that comes directly from our people," he said. "What's really wonderful about this award is that it recognizes our citizens for their participation and our staff for their hard work."

—Excerpted by permission of
Southern City
November 2000

Source: Local Government in North Carolina, Second Edition—Chapter 5, Improving the Community. Copyright © 2003 by Gordon P. Whitaker and the North Carolina City and County Management Association.

ment of many citizens. The range of citizen involvement in these efforts goes from being an appointed member of a task force and investing many hours in meetings, to being interviewed or surveyed for one-time input to the task force. Sidebar 9-2 gives a North Carolina example that received national recognition from the International City/County Managers Association.

Newer Technology: E-mail, Internet

As information technology changes have affected business and home life, so has it affected government and how citizens contact their local government officials. Websites for towns and counties are ubiquitous in North Carolina.¹² From these websites, citizens can find e-mail addresses for mayors, commission chairmen, and the other elected members of the respective deliberative bodies.

A few examples of websites with citizen involvement elements are:¹³

- City of Charlotte: The website for the city council includes biographical information, work and home addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses for council members. Citizens can offer comments in a box on the website and, if they include their e-mail address, are promised a reply.
- Watauga County: The county commissioners webpage includes photo, name, address, phone, and e-mail contact. On the same page, there is the “Citizen Feedback” link.
- Vance County: The county commissioners’ website provides a mission statement, photos, names, districts, and brief information on each commissioner. While links are provided to county departments, home addresses and phone numbers, and e-mail addresses are not listed.
- Town of Jamestown: One part of the town’s website includes town council members in a group photo with names, addresses, and phone numbers. The same page lists members of department heads, and citizen members of the Board of Adjustments and Planning and Zoning Board. Representatives from Jamestown to county and regional boards are also listed.

Finally, at least one North Carolina city council member (as of this writing) has a *blog*—a website where officials post their thoughts and respond to community issues, citizen comments, or other matters. This area of the Internet is changing very rapidly, so there may be many more examples of blogs in the future. Chapel Hill town councilwoman Sally Greene offers thoughts on a range of issues. She uses it for non-council-related ideas as well. Each entry allows readers to click and comment on Greene’s postings.

Informal Methods: Particular and Appropriate Use for Smaller Jurisdictions

Using a community visioning project involving hundreds of citizens and many staff hours, hiring a consulting firm to conduct a citizen survey, or running a community Web blog are methods that may only appeal to larger communities. Smaller communities have unique features that make other methods more appealing. For example, experienced local government officials in small towns often recommend that new managers visit the local coffee shops. In fact, “coffee shop conversations” is a common response to the question of how governments gauge public concerns in smaller communities. The familiarity of the people in small towns leads to informal, nonconfrontational methods of communication and interaction. In small towns, where board members are well known in the community, board meetings are quite informal, with active participation by the audience permitted, even encouraged. In addition, smaller communities tend to rely heavily on members of the community for public service, from the library board to organizing and manning a community festival. In fact, citizen participation is a method of survival in small jurisdictions.

12. The School of Government maintains a clearinghouse at <http://sog.unc.edu/library/guide/local.html> for the “home pages” of North Carolina counties and cities.

13. Website-based information is often quite dynamic. We offer the website addresses in the appendix, and apologize in advance for changes in focus and content after publication.

Local Government Employees' Responsibilities for Citizen Involvement

While citizen interactions—as property owners, victims or suspects of crime, community volunteer projects—are a part of many local government employees' work, we identify two specific kinds of positions with special duties in this area. *Clerks* to the board of county commission and *town clerks* typically have the responsibility for monitoring ACBs appointments and terms. They inform their respective elected bodies when citizens leave an ACB position, or when the term of office in an ACB is about to expire, and thus a new appointment must be made. The degree of other coordination or supervision of those ACBs—scheduling meetings and reserving space—varies by clerk.

Also, since the 1970s, about forty North Carolina cities and towns have created the position of *public information officer* (PIO).¹⁴ Approximately twenty counties have similar positions.¹⁵ While these positions primarily focus on getting information out to citizens in order to meet goals of the elected board, town/county manager, or department heads, PIOs often get involved with designing interactive settings for citizen involvement, which include hearings, information meetings, surveys, and other means for citizens to have input.

In addition to PIOs and clerks, the responsibilities of employees in the areas of planning, historic preservation, elderly services, health, and social services include staffing ACBs or other specific citizen input/involvement tasks. Some of these efforts include formal and informal means of getting input from “clients” or “customers” of particular services. Others include arrangements for public hearings, especially in the land use area.

One recent growth area is *citizen police academies* or *citizen academies*. While these focus on educating citizens through formal sessions and regular exposure to either law enforcement or multiple functions of cities and counties, it also reinforces the point that government employees are gaining new or expanded responsibilities in structured citizen interaction.

Three examples illustrate these efforts:

- Elkin Citizen's Academy: Offered for six weeks in February and March. Each two-hour class offers a free dinner and sessions at various sites around the town.
- Institute for Community Leadership: A joint program with Cumberland County, higher education, and K–12 schools offers training programs to empower community members and prepare them for civic leadership.
- Waynesville Police Academy: Established in 1997. The program lasts 9 to 10 weeks and gives citizens a close-up look at police work. An alumni group does fundraisers and helps the department with minor tasks.

Conclusion

This article addressed the values, trade-offs, and common forms of citizen involvement for local government. While the North Carolina Constitution and general political culture supports citizen involvement and elected official responsiveness, we examined some of the practical challenges of citizen involvement. State law requirements for citizen involvement were described, and the two most common methods of citizen involvement—public hearings and citizen advisory boards—were presented. Some newer forms of outreach and response were explained.

In closing, many local government officials—elected and appointed—desire effective citizen involvement and some are trying new ways to seek and receive citizens' views. In response, a few resources on general topics for citizen involvement are offered in Sidebar 9-3.

14. Municipal Public Relations Professionals in North Carolina—a list of names and contact information, dated 9/2005. Provided by Susan Moran, Public Information Officer, Town of Cary, January 11, 2006. Supplemented by research by the authors.

15. Personal communication, January 19, 2006, Todd McGee, Director of Communications, N.C. Association of County Commissioners. McGee estimated the number of PIOs for counties at twenty, noting that in some counties, the PIO duties are part of the job duties for another position (i.e., manager, assistant manager, personnel officer, etc.). About fifteen counties have a person whose title is Public Information Officer or something similar.

Sidebar 9-3. General Citizen Involvement Resources

- James L. Creighton (2005). *The Public Participation Handbook: Making Better Decisions through Citizen Involvement*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass (John Wiley & Sons). 261 pp.
- Paul D. Epstein, Paul M. Coates, Lyle D. Wray (with David Swain). 2006. *Results that Matter: Improving Communities by Engaging Citizens, Measuring Performance and Getting Things Done*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Matt Leighninger, (author); Shirley Tabata Ponomareff, (editor). 2005. *Citizens Building Communities: the ABCs of Public Dialogue*. League of Women Voters Education Fund. 14 pp. [exclusive of Foreword—inside FC; and “Resources”—inside BC]
- International Association for Public Participation: www.iap2.org
- From the International City-County Management Association:
1. Building Citizen Involvement: Strategies for Local Government Training Workbook. This training workbook from ICMA and NLC shows how to promote citizen involvement and community problem solving. *Training Workbook*. 1997.
 2. Citizen Academies—ICMA report—5 communities, includes Hickory, NC For details, see <http://www.icma.org/main/sc.asp>
- Youth involvement—NC Civic Education Consortium: <http://ncinfo.iog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/index.html>
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Appendix 9-1

Websites visited for this article:

City of Charlotte—website where citizens can communicate with City Council members:
<http://www.ci.charlotte.nc.us/Departments/City+Council/Forms/home.htm> (accessed Jan. 4, 2006)

Watauga County—the county commissioners webpage:
<http://www.wataugacounty.org/commissioners/members.html> (accessed Jan. 4, 2006)

Vance County—the main county webpage: <http://www.vancecounty.com/> (accessed Jan. 4, 2006)

City of Jamestown—the main city webpage:
<http://www.jamestown-nc.us/jamestown-nc-government.htm> (accessed Jan. 4, 2006)

Information on Blogs:

Blog address for Sally Greene, City Council member, Chapel Hill, NC:
<http://greenespace.blogspot.com/> (accessed March 16, 2006)

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