

## CHAPTER 3 – COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Comprehensive planning is one of the ways we look into the future to determine what we want to be as a community and what we want to see in our community. An essential element to realizing that future is discovering the needs, wants, and values of the community (that's you).

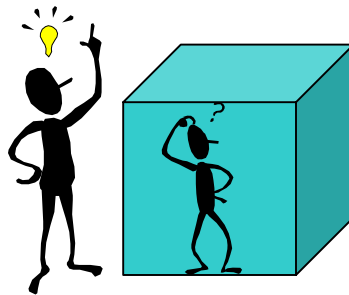
The comprehensive plans of many cities, towns, and villages call this CITIZEN participation, but there are more voices that need to be heard than just that of the CITIZEN. We need to hear the collective voice of the COMMUNITY.

### WHO IS THE COMMUNITY?

People who have an interest in what happens *in* the Village ... people that have an interest in what happens *to* the Village. Yes, people who live here are an important part of the community, but others are, too, like people who work here, employ people from here, spend their time here, provide services to us, and use services in the Village.

We also should remember that the decisions we make also affect those around us in surrounding towns and the Chicagoland region. With more emphasis being placed on the importance of regional coordination, it's also important to keep our neighbors informed of, and possibly involved in, our plans for our future. Skokie is part of a larger community, too.

So, who makes up this community? As we learned from Chapter 2, Skokie is not what many people perceive it to be. We need to think broadly and ask ourselves, "Who can possibly be affected by any decision that could be made?" That answer might include people like teenagers, bicycle commuters, or pet owners. Each case will be different. We just need to keep thinking outside the box.



## **WHY IS COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT?**

Getting as many people as possible to the table to talk (and maybe eat!) helps us to really understand the issues so we can make better informed decisions.

We are able to find out what people *actually value* rather than what *we* think they value. The community then has a voice in the operation of our government and the development of our built environment. The final decision-makers, policy-makers, developers, and investors can then hear issues and concerns voiced by their constituents and potential clients in order to better assess and address the needs of the community.

Every decision is interconnected. We may think we are protecting one group and end up harming another. Sometimes we get so passionate about one issue that we stop listening to others ... or worse ... we forget that other members of the community are here. This process gives us the opportunity to learn from one another, to think about things that we maybe didn't think about before and to possibly even change our minds about things we thought we knew.

Community participation is not about conflict, inflexibility, or trying to make individuals or specific groups happy. It is about hearing, being heard, and working together. It is about reaching out and admitting that we do not have all the answers. In the end, the final product may not be what each individual and specific group wants, but it will be closer to what everyone, as a whole, wants. It will be a plan that comes from the collective efforts of the community. The plan gains legitimacy *with* the community because it comes *from* the community.

## **WHAT WE NEED TO DO**

The first task we need to accomplish is to decide on a list of basic planning concepts for the whole community. These will be the underlying principles that guide us through the more specific decision making processes and will be the direction we will take for future planning outlined in Chapter 4.

After we decide on these principles, we need to apply these principles to transportation, housing, public facilities, and land use decisions. The level and scope of participation will depend on the issue being discussed. Some things apply to the whole Village, like the availability of housing or the Skokie Swift. Others might apply to a smaller community like a neighborhood shopping district or infrastructure improvements in the Southeast Industrial District.

## **HOW WE'RE GOING TO DO IT**

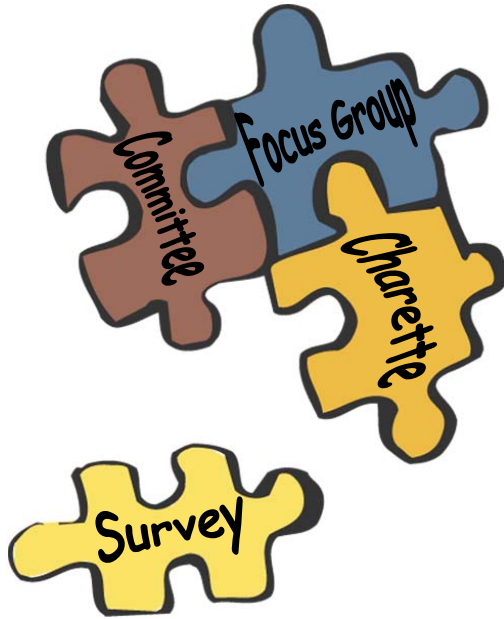
We want the process to be flexible so that we are able to best match the right pieces of our community and the right tools to the appropriate planning tasks. With this in mind, we have developed a "toolbox" of techniques and principles that can be appropriately used with different stakeholders. This toolbox will play a vital role in the facilitation of

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community participation, which is important in refining the goals and objectives of the different plans in the larger Comprehensive Plan – the vision of our future.

## THE TOOLS

There are several techniques available to facilitate community participation. Depending on the situation, some are more effective than others. All of them will go in our toolbox to be matched with the specific tasks at hand.



Some work significantly better when paired with one or more other techniques. Using just one technique will not always do the trick. It often takes a combination of techniques in the proper order to accomplish our goals.

OK, this is important ... the choice of which tool to use is directly related to the issue being addressed, the groups potentially impacted, and the ease and cost of collecting the data. Some forms of participation are more informal in structure, while others are more formal. Are you ready? Here they are:

**Public Hearing** – A meeting before elected or appointed officials, such as the Village Board or Plan Commission, using formal rules of order, and resulting in an official vote or recommendation.

This is the most structured and formal method of participation used in the latter part of the planning process after most information and comments have been gathered and considered. This is a good tool for eliciting commentary and consideration by elected and appointed representatives of the community, and it gives the community's official "stamp of approval" to the plan. This method allows participation by the public, but because it occurs late in the planning process, it is not the best method for gathering the public's opinions for establishing plan goals and objectives, or choosing various alternatives.

**Committee** – A group of people in the community that deal with the planning project from conception to completion. It usually consists of volunteers or appointees who work together with Village Staff and officials, investing considerable time in the process. This tool can be very valuable because committee members develop a high level of investment in the project. Although it does not allow a direct method of participation for all members of the public, a committee should be representative of residents and interest groups. Individuals may voice their views through committee members.

**Focus/Advisory Groups** – A group of community members similar to the committee, but, unlike a committee that meets regularly during the entire length of the process, each focus group typically meets once at an early phase of the process. The focus

group is a good method to promote dialogue between different groups in the community to identify issues and concerns toward establishing goals and objectives for the plan.

**Charette** – A multi-meeting intensive collaborative effort involving community members and sometimes Village staff and officials to create a detailed design plan for a specific area. They address and form solutions for problems in a short period, resulting in a comprehensive physical plan for a designated area of policy solution. Therefore, this method would not be useful for an overall general plan for a large area, but might be useful for addressing a small sub-area of the community. The charette is one of the fastest and best methods of developing consensus among various individuals and community groups.

**Surveys** – There are three principal types of surveys: mail, telephone, and in-person. In-person interviews are the most expensive, and mailed surveys are the least expensive. The drawback to mailed surveys is that they take a longer time to collect data, and often have a low response rate. Telephone surveys are less expensive than in-person surveys, and can provide statistically significant data in a relatively short time. Surveys are very useful for assessing the opinions and desires of the community.

**Electronic communications** – Web sites, email, and cable television have become increasingly common and useful methods for local governments to communicate with their citizens. Information regarding the planning process can be put on the web site or broadcast on cable access channels with citizens posting questions and comments directly to a site or responding by email. This is a convenient and relatively inexpensive tool. Citizens who may not be able to attend scheduled meetings may access the information at any time, on their own schedule.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Well, now we get planning! Each part of the plan will describe how the community participated in the process and the results of those efforts.



Look for this icon in the following chapters to find about community participation.