

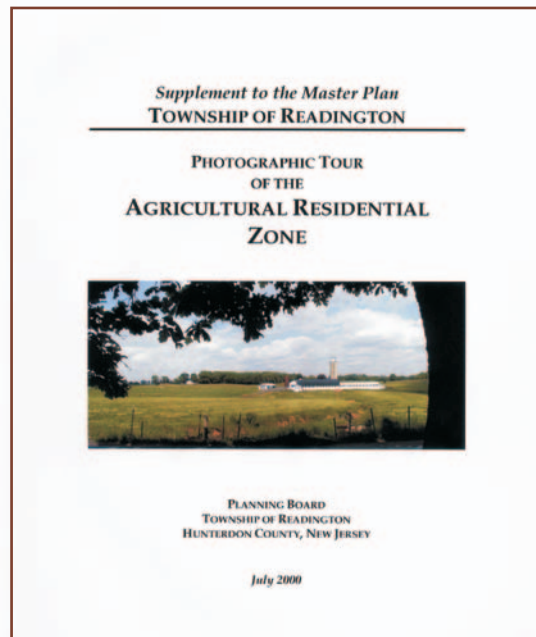
8. INVOLVING THE PUBLIC

Involving the public in the crafting of a community forestry program is not easy, but it is essential. This ensures that all stakeholders, everyone in the community who has a vested interest in the outcome, are fairly represented. The result will be a program with public support and enthusiasm.

The first step toward conserving trees in your community should be a public education campaign. The campaign should focus on creating an awareness of the type of resources located in the community, their value and threats to their long-term viability. Community education sessions should be scheduled at times when the public is most available to attend, and they should be fun. Successful education sessions are designed to be short, interesting, and interactive.

Once the public understands the issues, they should also be involved in putting together a comprehensive woodland conservation program. Builders and agencies that have development interests in the community should also be included in public discussion, and they should have a chance to respond to proposed ideas and strategies before they are adopted. When all parties concerned have input, they will feel a sense of ownership and inclusion in the regulatory process. They will be more likely to cooperate with the program because they will understand it and believe in it.

In addition to the community, outside entities should be brought into the public discussion about conservation program strategies. Outside governmental agencies and builder/developers are often responsible for woodland clearing in communities. They should be educated about the goals of the community and solicited for ideas about what they feel would work for them. If this is done, they will also begin to feel a sense of ownership and inclusion in the regulatory process, and be more likely to cooperate with the program.



Legal aspects of any type of conservation program should be reviewed and discussed with the municipal attorney. It is not clear what is legal and what is not, because law is a matter of interpretation by judges. Attorneys base many of their opinions as to whether regulations are “legal” on legal opinions and established case law. But many legal opinions overturned by a higher court repeatedly. Legal advice should be based on a thorough review of the current legal issues both nationwide and in New Jersey.

There are well-established methods to guide the general public through the design of a regulatory process. There are books and videos published on the topic. Professional facilitators are trained to lead the process, and do a great job. The process will take longer, but the results will be an individualized, well thought out and long lasting program.

CHOOSING A FORMAT

The process of public participation uses a logical path to problem solving. The use of a professional facilitator who has no vested interest in the outcome will allow for a more objective outcome. Many formats for public participation have been used successfully, and some require few public meetings. Your community should choose a format that best suits the demographic make-up of your town.

One of the ways to successfully get the public involved in the decision making process is to attract them through advertising and marketing. The other is to make sure that meetings are entertaining and create a sense of community. It is interesting to watch people at workshops who think they disagree on a matter, change their attitude after they realize that they have the same goals. Public involvement is an opportunity for members of the community to get to know each other, make new friends, and have a good time while doing important work.

If information about how to participate is widely advertised, people will be more likely to turn out. Open public meetings can be given a festive overtone by advertising them as open houses and pot-luck suppers. Saturday morning meetings will be better attended if the municipality serves bagels and coffee. Photo contests that support the project can help people get out looking at spectacular trees, creating an awareness of the assets in their town.

Today's modern lifestyle is very demanding, and families with two wage earners have little extra time to participate in evening or weekend meetings. The internet is the perfect forum for public participation in communities with a population that has limited time to attend evening and weekend meetings. Computer terminals can be placed in public places such as the local supermarket and libraries so that people without internet access at home can participate easily. This technique is very successful for towns that use it, but it requires a fairly sophisticated professional consultant capable of maintaining an interactive website for the duration of the process. This is a significant investment for a process can take from six months to one year or more.

Surveys or polls have been used to document public opinion through direct mail or internet campaigns. This can be costly, but very effective at gauging public sentiment. The idea of forming focus groups, and citizen advisory committees can also be effective, but this method results in limited input. Public hearings are required to be held to present the findings of these committees. These groups also need to have a qualified professional lead them, because they are not trained to follow a logical decision making process. Small groups that try to work on their own often get sidetracked and invest a great deal of time in exploring a very detailed solution only to find out later that the concept has no public support.

Whichever format is chosen, the process is clear and logical. The problem must be defined, a vision must be created, strategies must be developed, impacts caused by different alternatives must be explored and the final results have to be acceptable to the public before final solutions are ready for adoption.





THE PUBLIC DECISION MAKING PROCESS

The first phase of the decision making process, defining the problem, relies on background, or inventory information. This information is scientific in nature, and not subjective. Information about the type, location, and value of woodlands in the community should be presented. Pertinent problems such as forest fragmentation, loss of wildlife habitat, eroding slopes, and loss of beauty in the community can be presented. The public should be asked whether they agree with the problem statement, and should be asked what they perceive other problems to be. They can also be polled to find out which problems are most important to them. This will establish which values matter the most to the public and outside stakeholders.

The second is to create a vision, or goals. The vision is how the community would like to look in the future, and what role tree and woodland resources should play. No discussion of how to achieve the vision should be discussed at this stage. Many facilitators use a visual preference survey to gauge the desires of the public. Photographs of the community, as well as other communities, are presented to the public for comment. For instance, a series of images may show different types of land development, and different landscape treatments. This method is also used to educate the public, illustrating development scenarios. This method works well in an internet format.

Once a clear vision has been established, strategies for how to achieve the vision can be reviewed. Work sessions can be held where brainstorming can be used to develop a quick list of ideas. Once a long list has been made, a short list can be made relatively rapidly by ruling out strategies whose consequences or impacts do not meet the needs of the community. Some strategies may require more research to make sure that they are feasible.

In each case, pursuing a particular strategy may create conflict or require tradeoffs. This information can be used to create new, combined, or superior strategies than the original ones. It is important to remain flexible and work at a conceptual level during this phase of the decision making process. Some detailed information may be required to decide whether to pursue or eliminate a strategy, but it is best not to get bogged down with detailed alternatives until the short list is complete. Making decisions about which strategies to pursue requires a clear understanding of the preferences of participants, their key values, and what tradeoffs they are willing to make.

At this point, it is time to flesh out some of the alternatives to a greater extent, and try to anticipate the consequences in a more detailed way. Information about the capability of the local government to carry out each part of the program should be gathered. The information may include estimates of staffing needs, long term funding sources, facilities and equipment. Research on outside resources, public/private partnerships, and volunteer capabilities must be gathered at this point. This phase requires a description of how well each strategy contributes to the vision, or goals and objectives.

At this point, uncertainties about strategy decisions must be identified and quantified. What are the risks associated with each strategy, and what is the tolerance of the governing body for risk? If the community cannot tolerate a risky solution, then somewhat conservative strategies should be chosen. If there is a high appetite for risk in the community, and the community is willing to experiment, then higher risk alternatives can be pursued.

Once final solutions are chosen, it is important to decide how to monitor the success of the program, and a process for changing elements of the program that are not successful. Any new program will need to be reviewed and revised within the first few years of adoption.

Each and every stakeholder in the community will not necessarily agree with the final outcome. The chances are, however, that they will agree and support some parts of the program if they were involved in the decision making process. In every public debate or policymaking process, there is always a vocal minority. It is important to measure public sentiment and document that the majority of the community supports the conservation program. The vocal minority should be given a respectful forum to present their viewpoint, and their viewpoint should be documented. The vocal minority should not be allowed to dominate public meetings. The professional facilitator should reiterate the results of public surveys and then move on when the vocal minority tries to dominate a meeting.

When the public is involved in the design of the conservation program, they will support the program because they understand it and believe in it. The process of public involvement creates a sense of ownership, eliminating the sentiment that the governing body, a municipal board, or an organization with a limited focus has devised a program that doesn't work for the community. Public involvement is the key to a successful community forestry program.

PUBLIC EVENTS IN CELEBRATION OF TREES

If advertising and marketing are important during the decision making process, the same is true about the community forestry program in general. Once your community has a program, you should keep the public involved in a consistent way. This will ensure the long-term viability of the program.

WAYS TO CELEBRATE TREES

- Develop a community arboretum.
- Advertise your successes by submitting press releases to local newspapers about local volunteers and events. Include a photo.
- Provide public education sessions on how to choose, plant, and care for trees.
- Use homeowner associations as a way to organize the sessions when possible.
- Publish photos of big trees in the local newspaper and have members of the public vote for their favorite tree. Do this every year.
- Invite artists to submit work with a tree or woodland theme for display at the local art museum. Hold a gallery opening.
- Design a street tree sponsor program to help fund planting new trees.

“... a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided.”

-Aldo Leopold

A major benefit of public events is the opportunity to create a forum for public education. Many residents in suburbanizing communities have no idea how to choose, plant, or maintain trees or woodlands. They are made responsible for street tree care by default, but have no skills at caring for trees. Or they may hold property with woodlands located in a conservation easement, but have no idea how to be act as a proper steward.

ARBOR DAY IDEAS

- Present awards to local community leaders who support community forestry.
- Have a poetry contest and invite the winners to recite their poem at the celebration. Their families will probably want to attend, as well.
- Invite an elementary school class to help plant a tree.
- Hold a photo contest for the public. Use the winning photo on Arbor Day
- Posters.
- Invite the high school band to play at the celebration.
- Invite local celebrities to present awards.
- Invite local businesses to help sponsor the event.
- Advertise the celebration and serve food.

Many homeowners buy large lots, several acres in size, and maintain them as lawn because they don't understand that there are other alternatives to land management. The public needs to understand how to act as stewards of tree and woodland resources on their property. Once they are educated, they will understand the importance of the under story vegetation in a forest, how to identify exotic and invasive plants, and how to re-establish forests on denuded land.

Public events allow volunteers, who work hard with no tangible reward, to get the recognition they deserve. These events are places where new volunteers can be recruited, and where volunteers on different boards can meet and trade ideas.

Many communities do not have the volunteers, funding, or other resources to have many public celebrations or education sessions. It is better to focus the resources that you do have on one or two successful events per year than to spread valuable resources or volunteers too thin. A plethora of ideas for ways to celebrate trees will be suggested to volunteers by members of the public. These should be carefully culled. The most widely known celebration of trees is Arbor Day, celebrated in New Jersey on the last Friday in April. This is the easiest public celebration to hold, and if you only have the resources to put on one event per year, this is a good candidate.

The National Arbor Day Foundation can provide ideas and printed matter for Arbor Day celebrations. They also have a program that allows the public to celebrate any event by planting trees. They will plant a number of trees for a small cost and send a card notifying the person celebrating a birthday or anniversary that trees have been planted in celebration of the event. There are also many other programs that are already established by national organizations.

In New Jersey, there is also a Memorial Tree Program. Funeral directors throughout the state can provide information on how the program works. The memorial tree is planted in the community of the deceased in their honor.

Tree planting programs are not limited to individual trees. Many watershed associations and non-profit organizations have been involved in forest restoration projects. The most common type of restoration planting projects are done along stream corridors, but other types of open space parcels have been planted with native trees as well. Funding for these types of projects is available from the state annually.

Many types of grant applications require matching funds by the organization applying for the grant. The use of volunteer labor hours, however, often counts toward matching funds. So it is important to quantify how many volunteer labor hours are contributed toward public projects each year. Resources for funding are listed at the end of this handbook.

