

Handbook Highlight from the Montana Municipal Officials Handbook

7.107 Focus Groups

Another effective means to engage the public is the use of focus groups. A focus group is a structured discussion with pre-selected individuals that is intended to collect information or gauge public opinion on a specific policy issue or idea. Focus groups are traditionally used in market research to determine consumer's opinions of products or services but are increasingly used in local government settings to provide a deliberative venue for learning, trust-building, creative problem solving, and ultimately as a way for citizens to influence policy or to educate government officials. The group is led by an impartial facilitator, using someone outside of local government. Focus groups typically involve a small assembly of individuals (usually numbering between 5 and 15) based on their relationship to an issue and representation of community demographic characteristics.

A focus group may provide insightful understanding of complex issues and situations which cannot be gathered from standard surveys or large public meetings. Focus groups also provide an opportunity for individuals to express their views in detail, to hear the opinions of others, and to collectively develop resolutions to problems. Both technical and anecdotal information can be presented and debated, which can lead to creative problem-solving and broad community support for a potential local government action. Perhaps most importantly, a successful focus group can enhance and support the work of local government officials.

LGC NOTE: Focus groups can be an effective way to get valuable information from your public. LGC staff have been facilitating focus groups throughout Montana. Recently, the Institute of Medicine hosted community conversations in Fort Benton to explore community response to flu pandemic. The Gallatin City County Health Department is working with LGC staff to enable public engagement on a county-wide health assessment project. If you think that a focus group approach will be effective on a complex issue in your community, the LGC is happy to help. For additional information, you may access a MontGuide on Using Focus Groups for Community Development (written by Paul LaChapelle);

<http://msuextension.org/publications/BusinessandCommunities/MT200807HR.pdf>