

Working Together for Lasting Solutions: The Collaborative Approach to Resolving Public Issues

Communities today face tough issues. Land use is an issue that has taken on increased importance across Indiana. “Dealing with land use issues or with other complex public issues is a difficult challenge for community decision-makers,” says Janet Ayres, Purdue Extension Leadership Development Specialist. “A key factor in whether or not such issues are resolved successfully is the process used to reach agreements.”

Community leaders need to find a proactive approach that both resolves public issues and strengthens the community. The collaborative problem-solving approach does this by bringing major interested parties together to develop a mutually acceptable solution for everyone involved.

“The collaborative approach is not easy,” Ayres says. “It’s messy and requires a lot of time in the beginning. However, when the agreement is reached, it is more sustainable in the long run.”

Principles

Several principles underlie the collaborative problem-solving approach.

Make a Commitment to Inclusiveness

The first step is to identify major stakeholders and their interests. Ayres says, “When people with diverse viewpoints on the community come together, it encourages discussions that can lead to new understandings and solutions.”

Keep Communication Open

Understanding each other is vitally important to finding solutions. “People gain understanding through sharing information, which requires good listening skills and a willingness to be open to other people and ideas,” she says.

Demand Mutual Respect for All

It’s important that people recognize it is okay to disagree. Participants need to understand others’ perspectives. Name calling, intolerance, leaving meetings early, and other belittling acts don’t help the process. The focus should be on the issue, not on the people.

Understand Interests (Don’t State Positions)

Moving discussion beyond *what* people want (their position) to *why* they want it (their interest) is crucial in finding solutions acceptable to all participants. Ayres notes, “This is difficult because people come into the process with their solutions to the issue.”

Find Shared Interests

Participants’ shared interests provide the basis for mutual learning and collaborative problem solving. It’s important that they educate one another about their interests. “Through this learning process, they develop a common sense of purpose and a definition of the problem,” Ayres says.

Work for Consensus

When everyone involved in a conflict agrees on the solution, implementing and sustaining it will be much easier and more effective. Consensus is not unanimity (everyone’s first choice) or compromise (everyone gives in). Ayres says, “Consensus means that everyone’s views have been heard and understood, and that no one will block implementation.”

Process

The collaborative problem-solving approach involves 5 major stages.

Get Started

Ayres explains that the first step is framing the issue so that it doesn’t cause people to take sides. Instead of asking, “Does the community want farmland protection?” a better way to frame the issue is, “How can we foster economic growth and protect farmland?” This places the issue in a problem-solving framework.

It’s important to involve key stakeholders, those who will make the decision, be affected by the decision, or could block implementation. Ayres says, “All



stakeholders must be involved from the start. Those whose stake might not be apparent at first glance and those considered 'the enemy' must also be involved." The planning committee should meet face-to-face with the key stakeholders to explain the process and why their involvement is important.

Before participants start working on solutions, they should agree on ground rules that will build a level of trust among the participants. "Ground rules are the operating rules that determine how the process is conducted," Ayres says. They include *procedural* rules, such as how decisions will be made. *Substantive* ground rules spell out what topics will and will not be addressed by the group. *Behavioral* rules govern how individuals interact with each other.

"The group needs to agree on the expected outcomes and how they will be used," she says. Will the group have the final authority to make the decision, or does the group just have an advisory role?

The group should establish a general agenda and time line for completion. Ayres notes, "It's important to recognize that a collaborative effort will take more time to plan, to convene, to gather and assess information, and to develop and select options."

Define the Problem

At this stage, participants should clarify the problem and legitimize all perceptions of the problem. Having good listening skills and leaving enough time for everyone to be heard are essential. "If one of the participants believes that his or her viewpoint is not being treated as legitimate, the process is likely to break down," Ayres cautions.

Participants also need to complete the following tasks:

- Determine what information they have regarding the issue;
- Identify the portion of information that is accepted as accurate by all the participants; and
- Determine what additional information, if any, is needed to negotiate effectively.

Analyze Alternatives

Participants must clearly state their interests rather than their positions to each other. "Finding alternatives that satisfy everyone's interests should be the common goal of the group," Ayres says. All should consent to use the agreed-upon interests as performance criteria when developing and judging alternative solutions.

Next, participants can agree to a period of inventing without deciding or judgment. "Brainstorming can be used to produce as many ideas as possible for solving the problem," Ayres says.

Once the group members feel they have invented enough alternatives, they must decide which ones to include in a proposed resolution. Ayres notes, "The key is that the major interests have been satisfied."

Reach Agreement

An important part of creating resolution is finding agreement and developing provisions to ensure that the participants will honor the terms of that agreement, Ayres says. "Every participant must be assured that the others will carry out their parts."

Ayres says, "The group should document areas of agreement to ensure a common understanding of their resolution and to make certain that the terms are communicated effectively."

Ayres adds that the participants involved in the negotiations must get support for the agreement from the groups they identified in the first step of the process.

Implement Solutions

Individuals and groups must implement the solutions that were decided upon in the written agreement. Ayres notes, "If the people responsible for carrying out the solutions were involved or at least kept informed throughout the process, implementation of the solutions will be much easier."

The group must keep track of the success of their solutions. They should charge subcommittees with responsibility for monitoring and calling the participants back together if troubleshooting becomes necessary.

Additional Keys to Success

Maintaining contact with constituency groups and the public is important throughout the process. "If there is little communication between the group and others in the community until the group comes forward with a resolution, there is a higher probability that the resolution will be rejected," Ayres says. Working with the media is a good way to stay in contact with the public.

"Dealing with controversial public issues is hard work," says Ayres. "Community leaders can learn collaborative problem-solving skills that they can practice and model for the community so that residents can resolve their issues in constructive ways."