

Gaining Public Support – Experience with Citizen Advisory Committees

Public reaction to rising rates and large expenses for infrastructure renewal and replacement often is one of alarm and surprise. The perception of customers, rightly or wrongly, is that they are overcharged for their wastewater service. However, in many instances customers pay less for wastewater services. These situations are due to a number of factors, political considerations, lack of understanding of the true cost of service, utility board policies, and so on. Utilities must get by with what they have as opposed to actually having an asset management strategy in place.



Citizen advisory committees are a good way to involve stakeholders in supporting infrastructure sustainability and asset management programs.

Citizen advisory committees are a good way in which the stakeholders can be involved in supporting infrastructure sustainability and asset management. Indeed a goal of an asset management program is to obtain a venue for the utility to explain what it is it does. WERF researchers examined utility experience with citizens groups and documented examples through case studies, findings, and observations in committee formations, logistics, and objectives.

Decision Makers Have Positive Opinion of Advisory Groups

Public support and understanding of infrastructure investment cannot be accomplished without establishing a means for the utility to ‘tell their story.’ The WERF report *Public Communications – Perceptions and Early Communication Tools* (SAM1R06a) presented local officials’ perceptions of infrastructure sustainability. The results suggested that citizen support of strategic asset management was not vital, but their support for the concept of infrastructure sustainability is critical. Arising from this research was the necessity for utilities to communicate with the public. Customer surveys, materials inserted with bills,

Municipality	State	Utility	Organization
City of Ann Arbor	MI	City of Ann Arbor Storm Water Utility	Citizen Advisory Committee
City of Indianapolis	IN	Indianapolis Department of Public Works	Citizen Advisory Group
Johnson County	KS	Johnson County Wastewater Department	Stakeholder Group
Las Vegas	NV	Las Vegas Valley Water District	Citizen Advisory Council
Multiple municipalities	MA	Massachusetts Water Resources Authority	Advisory Board and Committees
Providence	RI	Narragansett Bay Commission	Citizen Advisory Committee
Portland	OR	Portland Water Bureau	Stakeholder Budget Committee
San Francisco	CA	San Francisco Public Utilities Commission	Citizen Advisory Council
Tacoma	WA	Tacoma Water	Citizen Advisory Panel
Multiple municipalities	MD	Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission	Citizen Advisory Council

BENEFITS

- Provides insight into utilities’ experience with citizen advisory committees for infrastructure sustainability.
- Identifies knowledge that water utility managers can use to develop their own citizen advisory committee programs.
- Demonstrates that meaningful public engagement is necessary to achieve support for investment in infrastructure sustainability.
- Identifies common experience and useful guidance that can be used to establish citizen advisory committees.

RELATED PRODUCTS

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and websites provide one-way communication, but citizen advisory committees are an effective method to discuss issues directly with the stakeholders.

Published literature on citizen advisory committees is limited however. The research team was able to use the information to identify utilities that had some form of citizen interactions. A survey was prepared and questions were asked of the representatives of the utilities presented in the table on page 1. The results of the survey were used to produce case studies.

Benefits of Citizen Advisory Committees

The research identified common approaches and factors that should be considered in the design, formation, and management of these committees that the utilities believe yielded the greatest benefits. The makeup of the committee directly affected how the group performed. Attention was placed on having a good cross section of opinions and sectors (business, other ratepayers, and environmental groups). Involvement of opponents was recognized as a positive contribution to any dialog.

Making the group welcome and feel appreciated created an environment of comfort. The utilities recognized that providing technical personnel and materials to support the groups contributed to a higher level of comfort for the members. Additionally, groups that received extra support had a greater knowledge of the issues and made larger contributions to decision making. Logistics and support provided by the utilities were seen as small expenses that provided a good return by having a knowledgeable Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC).

Central to the success of these groups is communication with a CAC. Finding the right balance of meetings to maintain momentum without burdening the members was crucial. Generally, four to eight meetings per year was appropriate. Using email also was seen as effective, especially to alert CAC members of media coverage, or as one manager noted to “get ahead of anything that might be a surprise.”

In general, the role of the Citizen Advisory Committees was to provide input and advice on difficult decisions. The degree of CAC influence varied depending on the history and culture of public involvement, as well as the scope and nature of the issues. In most cases, CACs were not charged with gaining support for, or trust in a utility; although oftentimes a well-run CAC achieved this outcome.

Most of the utilities in this research did not have specific goals for a CAC to communicate with the larger community. However, this frequently occurred because of the contacts of a CAC member. This added to the transparency of utility decisions to the public, which in turn engendered greater trust in what they were doing. Several of the utilities noted that from the CACs they learned about citizen positions and the reasons for their positions. It also helped utility personnel to communicate with the public in terms that they could understand.

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