

From: Larry Schooler <larry@p3partners.net>
Date: May 10, 2018 at 10:36:10 PM EDT
To: <larryschooler@miamibeachfl.gov>
Subject: Memo to Commission and Executive Staff



City of Miami Beach, 1700 Convention Center Drive, Miami Beach, Florida 33139, www.miamibeachfl.gov

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor, City Commissioners, and Executive Team

FROM: Larry Schooler, Public Engagement Manager

DATE: May 11, 2018

SUBJECT: Suggested Next Steps and Best Practices in Public Engagement

BACKGROUND

As many of you are aware, the City of Miami Beach has embarked on a journey to pursue cutting-edge, paradigm-shifting methods for involving the community in CMB decisions that would affect them. The thought process was, while a number of Miami Beach residents came to Commission meetings and Committee meetings to offer testimony, it seemed beneficial for the City explore additional avenues (both in-person and through technology) for the Commission to get a clearer understanding of the views of the community. The goal was for the community to feel more involved in the decisions and for the City to get consensus on important issues more efficiently.

To that end, I am providing you with some recommendations for next steps to take in advancing the City of Miami Beach's work engaging in productive, consensus-building dialogue with residents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identified Need for a Public Participation Guidebook

In early presentations to the City Commission in open session, I found that the City agreed that those affected by a City decision should be able to affect that decision. The idea of rethinking the City's approach to public engagement was supported on several

levels, including a potential General Obligation Bond referendum in November of this year.

The ultimate value in developing a Public Participation Guidebook for the City of Miami Beach comes from clarifying expectations for both the public and staff as they engage with the public, and from creating more *Proactive, Prudent, and Productive* engagement in the future.

- *Proactive*--the City should discuss potential policies and projects with the public much earlier in the development process and allow for the public to offer suggestions around how the project or policy should be fleshed out. In my time at the City, it appeared that several issues became controversial, in part, based on when the public felt engaged in relation to when the project was finalized.
 - *Prudent*--many government agencies have found themselves having to cancel or redo projects based on protests from the public over opportunities for input; the policymaking process also often gets elongated when public hearings get repeatedly postponed or prolonged, costing money due to these delays. In both cases, CMB should strive to create a process for engagement that allows the public to understand the proposed project or policy, offer input, and then review alternative approaches.
 - *Productive*--fundamental to public engagement, according to the [International Association for Public Participation \(IAP2\)](#), is the idea that the public's input will have a demonstrable impact on a government's decision. A public hearing often cannot fulfill that objective. CMB needs to engage early enough and ask the right questions of the public to glean input that will be useful to the policymaking or project development process.
-
- Identified Need for establishing a clear Mission Statement

Based on observations, my recommendation is for the City to develop a clear Mission Statement related to its public participation goals. In other words, an articulation of the foundational values around engagement will help an average citizen trust that the organization will listen to and incorporate community viewpoints, and CMB commissioners and staff will feel confident that they have done their best to glean the community's sentiments through a thoughtful, tailored conversation.

From my years of experience doing this work around the country, I have provided some concepts derived from other agencies' Mission Statements for public participation and engagement that may also be applicable to the City of Miami Beach.

- Valuing Participation
- Inclusivity and Diversity

- Accessibility and Information Provision
- Promote Dialogue, Deliberation, Discussion, and Listening
- Timing and Responsiveness
- Tailor and Evaluate Process
- Build Credibility of and Belief in the Process
- Ongoing Education, Longevity, and Sustainability
- Clearly Communicate and Guide the Process

For more on these, I encourage you to visit [these links to other agencies' statements of values](#).

- Create a Unique Set of Innovative Strategies

For the City of Miami Beach to develop a better working relationship with the public, you, as its leaders, have to demonstrate courage and buck the trend of having a public hearing at an official Commission meeting function as the basis of your public engagement. As I outlined in training sessions I conducted with CMB staff and executives last summer, the public hearing may be necessary, but it is in no way adequate as a means of understanding the views of the public as a whole.

Public hearings often attract a relatively tiny number of citizens, many of whom speak at hearing after hearing, most of whom are unlikely to sway Commissioners on a matter awaiting their vote. Given the unstructured sequence the Commission uses to go through much of its agenda, a person may have to sacrifice an entire day in order to get their few minutes at a microphone--and may ultimately speak at a point in the day or night when all are exhausted.

Public hearings also privilege only those with the enormous self-confidence and courage needed to deliver a speech to powerful elected leaders on live television. By its very nature, the public hearing significantly narrows the playing field for members of the public who feel uncomfortable with that amount of spotlight on them, or who do not know how to make a formal speech but can share comments more informally, or who have other obligations and cannot afford to take a day off of work or away from those responsibilities for a short speech. Additionally, it can be very difficult for an average citizen to understand exactly what it is the Commission is voting on at its meetings, given the complexities of agenda language, so many might choose not to speak simply because they cannot comprehend how they might be impacted by the proposed measure.

- Explore and Experiment with Proven, Cutting-edge Public Engagement Strategies

If providing meaningful opportunities for the public to engage and gathering a meaningful sample of public opinion is important, the City of Miami Beach needs to explore and experiment with other, proven, cutting-edge public engagement strategies that reach much larger populations and provide a much broader range of viewpoints than a public hearing can. I attempted to deploy such methods on behalf of the General Obligation Bond process, but I was ineffective at doing so.

These strategies could include:

- Innovative designs for public meeting that build in greater interaction among citizens and between citizens and staff;
- The use of simulations to help put members of the public into the City's shoes--e.g., the use of play money spent by residents on bond projects;
- Creation of a "meeting in a box" distributed to condo/homeowner associations, business groups, and the like, to allow regularly-meeting organizations to conduct their own conversations on important topics to the City and return input;
- Development of a section of the existing city website or a new portal designed to engage in dialogue with the public--with features like threaded discussions, multimedia surveys, a page for soliciting new ideas and gauging how much the public supports various ideas, etc.;
- Regular usage of MBTV77 for interactive town hall meetings, in which members of the public can call in, text in, or participate via social media, taking a meeting that might otherwise have only gotten input from a handful of residents and bringing it to a much larger audience.

Some of these techniques may not fit as well (or at all) with Miami Beach residents as others; ultimately, the City should assemble a public engagement toolbox that allows for flexibility and versatility depending on the project, the audience, and the extent to which the public can influence the City's ultimate decision. I strongly encourage the City to experiment with some of these tools to determine which will actually work and which are better suited to another community.

- Create an Internal Process

I also want to recommend that the City review how it does its work. On a number of occasions, I found myself confused as to what direction I should take on a project; for example, I received the Commission's blessing on two occasions for an engagement strategy related to the General Obligation Bond, but I was subsequently told to scrap or significantly change it. I also received conflicting information from multiple members of staff, which made it hard to know how to add the most value to the organization.

I recognize that a municipal government is a large bureaucracy, and it is not always easy or possible for all involved to know what each other is thinking. That said, I believe it is incumbent on you as policymakers and trusted leaders to offer clear and consistent guidance to staff, particularly around opportunities for the public to provide feedback, in order to ensure positive results.

CONCLUSION

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to partner with the City of Miami Beach in this most salient and strategic endeavor. My hope is that our work together has added value to the organization, particularly as it prepares for a potential referendum of the voters in November.

To all of those I have worked with on this project, deepest thanks for this opportunity. To the greater CMB organization, I wish you continued success and that our paths may meet again. If I can help in any way in the future, please reach out: 786-459-5637 or Larry@p3partners.net.

With gratitude,

Larry Schooler