# Albemarle County Government

# Administrative Guidelines for Public Participation Plans

# Planning for Meaningful Public Participation

As a government entity, Albemarle County is entrusted to administer and invest public resources to accomplish a variety of goals and objectives that benefit Albemarle County. Planning for meaningful, timely, effective and consistent public participation in appropriate aspects of County activities is essential to the successful implementation of County policies, programs, and projects.

* Meaningful public participation builds relationships with citizens based on mutual trust, inclusiveness and respect.
* Meaningful public participation helps promote democracy and civic engagement, builds public trust in government, enhances the County’s credibility within the community, and improves the quality and effectiveness of County plans and decisions.
* Meaningful public participation means that the County develops citizen participation activities that reflect the County Values and Guiding Principles outlined below.
1. Purpose of the Public Participation Plan Guidelines

The purpose of the Public Participation Plan Guidelines is to establish a systematic approach to determining the appropriate level of public participation, if any, for a County project. The objective is to engage citizens in meaningful ways, when appropriate, to assist the County in successful project implementation.

1. Guiding Principles

Building on the County’s values of ***Integrity, Innovation, Stewardship*** and ***Learning***, these **Guiding Principles** formthe foundation for creating meaningful County public participation activities**:**

1. **Building relationships, trust and community capacity—**The foundation for successful public participation is opening channels of communication early with partners and stakeholders, and developing collaborative working relationships with them. Effective public participation activities should leave neighborhoods and communities stronger and with increased capacity to influence their livability.
2. **Inclusive and respectful—**Broad public participation will be welcome. An effort will be made to identify, invite and encourage stakeholders to be involved early in public participation processes. Their input and feedback will be given careful and respectful consideration.
3. **Adaptable and creative—**The extent, timing, manner, and outcomes of public participation activities will necessarily vary to suit the circumstances and magnitude of a particular project or decision, and facilitate maximum public participation.
4. **Transparent results—**The public participation process will be transparent with results to be fully shared back to participants and with officials involved in the decision-making process.
5. Public Participation Levels and Definitions

To provide a framework for public participation activities, it’s helpful to define public participation concepts. The term “Public Participation” takes in all levels of “public” information, education, relations, outreach, input, involvement and collaboration. Public outreach is a basic element needed for any level of public participation. The intensity of participation increases from left to right, beginning with one-way information to two-way communication and collaboration. The graphic below illustrates the correlation and differences among the terms used to describe public participation.

* + 1. Definitions of terms used in the graphic above:
	1. **Public Participation—**Any process that strives to inform, gather input or involve the public regarding decision-making processes. Public participation is the umbrella term to describe all levels of “public” information, education, relations, outreach, input, involvement and collaboration.
1. **Public Outreach—**Identifying and inviting target audiences and stakeholders to participate in a public participation activity, or to market Albemarle County products and services.
	1. **Public Information—**A **one-way communication** from Albemarle County to the public with the goal of providing balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.
	2. **Public Education—**A hands-on public participation activity with the goal of deeper public understanding about the project, program or activity e.g. questions and answer sessions, guided tours, etc.
	3. **Public Input—**Seeking community feedback on a proposal, analysis or alternatives. Requires a response from the public, but limited opportunity for public dialogue.
	4. **Public Involvement—**Working directly with the public throughout a process to ensure that the project, issues, aspirations and concerns are consistently understood and considered by staff in planning and decision-making. Involvement includes many elements of both public information and public outreach, but adds a third dimension of **two-way communication.**
	5. **Public Collaboration—**Collaborating with members of the public in some or all aspects of a decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of a preferred solution.
		1. Additional Definitions:
	6. **Public Participation Plan—**A customized plan for undertaking public involvement, information, education and/or outreach activities for a specific project or decision-making process.
	7. **Public Relations—**The dissemination of information to the media and the public, with an emphasis on the promotion of a particular policy, project, or solution.
	8. **Stakeholders—**Any individual, group of individuals, organization or political entity that has an interest in or is potentially impacted by a County policy, program, or project.
	9. **Target Audiences—**Specific private or public individuals, groups, and strategic partners within the larger community who are impacted by and whose participation is needed or highly desirable to achieve an identified public participation or project goal.

# Requirements for Public Participation Plans

With the fundamentals of public participation defined, the next consideration is determining when public participation plans are required. A well-designed public participation plan results in several important outcomes:

* Helps County staff determine whether or not public participation is necessary for a particular project.
* Helps County staff determine the types of participation activities that will be meaningful and effective.
* Creates accurate expectations for County staff and the public about the goals of public participation activities, building better relationships with the community.
* Creates consistent public participation activities based on best practices.

*Note about consultants: In the event any public participation activities are part of a scope of work being performed for Albemarle County by others through a contractual arrangement (i.e. consultant or interagency agreement), County staff will maintain responsibility for insuring that the public participation activities are fully in accordance with the Public Participation Plan Administrative Guidelines, including the development of a Public Participation Plan.*

1. Public Participation Plan
	* 1. The purpose of a *Public Participation Plan* is to provide a clear description to stakeholders of why, when, and how they can participate. Having a clear *Plan* at the beginning of a process will help alleviate misunderstandings during and at the end of the process about how input is to be used and decisions are to be made.
		2. Prior to starting a project that includes public participation activities, a *Public Participation Plan* containing a schedule and description of all the planned public participation activities needs to be prepared and approved by the Community Relations Director.
		3. During the public participation process, it is entirely appropriate to revise the *Plan* or schedule as circumstances require, so long as that is clearly articulated to the stakeholders, and the revised *Plan* is approved and modified to reflect changes.
		4. Additional details, suggestions and resources for designing a *Public Participation Plan* are contained in a *Public Participation Guide* maintained by the Community Relations Office.
2. Required Public Participation Plans

According to the Albemarle County Public Participation Plan Administrative Guidelines, a public participation plan is required for the types of projects or activities described below. The decision to create a public participation plan for a specific project or activity will be made jointly by the community Relations Office and the appropriate department head. If you think you may have a project that should have a Public Participation Plan, please contact the Community Relations Director.

1. Major Policy Decision: When Albemarle County is developing a major policy or implementation plan that will be adopted by the Board of Supervisors.

**Examples:**

Comprehensive Plan Chapter Amendments

Master Plans

1. **Project Planning:** When Albemarle County is creating a study or planning a project for a specific area to implement an adopted master plan strategy or construct a public facility.

**Examples:**

Crozet Old School Reuse Study

Crozet Library

New Pantops Fire Station

1. **Strategies and Programs:** When Albemarle County is developing an implementation strategy or program to guide future efforts and investment by the Board of Supervisors to meet County goals.

**Example:**

Budget

1. **Other Public Participation Activities:** When undertaking any public participation activity, staff should follow County guidelines and best practices in planning and carrying out those activities. Development of a Public Participation Plan is highly recommended whenever public participation activities are planned for a project or process.

**Example:**

Crozet Town Meeting

1. **Note about Legally-required public notice/participation:** Procedures for public notice and/or public participation contained in federal, state or local laws or regulations and applicable to a particular program or project activity shall be followed in lieu of any similar process otherwise required by the Public Participation Plan Guidelines.

**Public Participation Plans are critical for projects where:**

* + - 1. The County has flexibility with elements of a project that could impact stakeholders and/or neighborhoods (e.g. timing, construction use closures, minor design elements, retail strategy, etc.).
			2. There is significant public interest in a specific project that the County is contemplating or undertaking.
			3. A County project follows or is a continuation of another public project in the same area and community interest has been or is heightened by the previous project.
1. Public Participation Guide.

The extent of public participation will necessarily vary based on a variety of factors, including:

* The desired outcome (e.g. policy, plan or decision).
* Geographic scope and impact.
* Financial magnitude of public investment.
* Relationship to existing public policies and plans.
* Extent and diversity of stakeholder impacts and interest.

Additional details, suggestions and resources for designing a public participation process and plan are contained in a *Public Participation Guide* maintained by the Community Relations Office.

1. Authorities and Responsibilities
2. **Community Relations Office**
	1. **The Community Relations Director is responsible for and authorized to approve all Public Participation Plans.**
	2. The Community Relations Office is responsible for developing and maintaining a *Public Participation Guide* for staff to use as a resource in developing a *Public Participation Plan* and carrying out related public participation activities.
	3. This Guide will contain standard Albemarle practices and procedures, as well as suggestions, tips and best practices recommended by public participation professionals.
	4. The Community Engagement Specialist is responsible for ensuring that these guidelines and County practices contained in the *Public Participation Guide* are in compliance with County Code and associated standards and procedures related to public participation.
	5. The Community Engagement Specialist in collaboration with Human Resources is responsible for providing training and technical support to staff in meeting the requirements of these guidelines and integrating effective public participation in projects and programs.
3. **Directors and managers** are responsible for ensuring that projects under their supervision incorporate public participation plans and activities that promote and support the guiding principles of these guidelines.
4. **Project managers and staff** are responsible for promoting and implementing effective public participation activities in projects and programs that they supervise or support.