COMMUNITY
TOOL BOX

Focus Groups

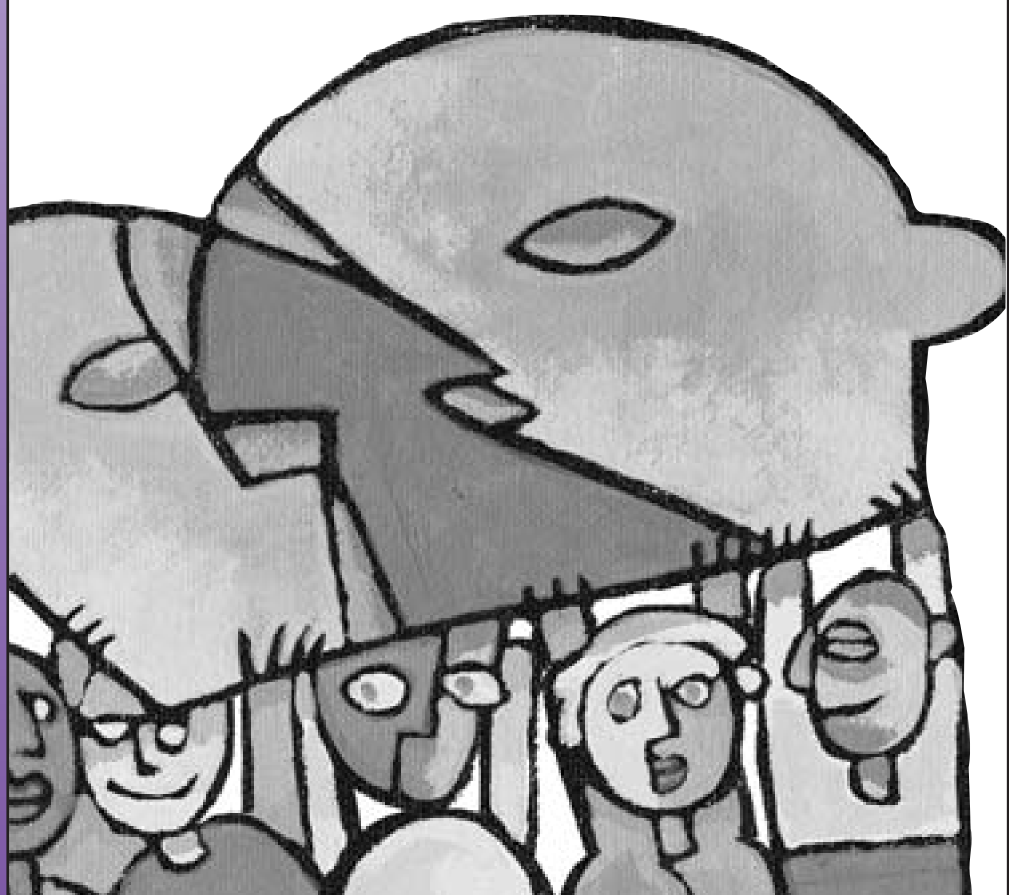
Focus Group:

A group interview where 8-12 people respond to a specific concept or subject.

What We've Found

Focus groups are a quick means to generate ideas and get reactions. With the aid of a professional facilitator, a small group of people, and a meeting space, in only two hours you can have pages of responses and opinions about a plan or a newsletter or any specific element of your project.

While information gathered in a focus group should not be considered a representative sample of public opinion, focus groups can help you understand different groups' perceptions and expectations. We also find questions and issues that arise in focus groups can be used as the basis of other public involvement work such as surveys and workshops. This input can help drive development of policies, programs and services and help target limited project resources where they are most needed.



Just the Facts

Focus groups are an excellent opportunity to explore attitudes in-depth and gain understanding about underlying issues. The small setting gives community members and stakeholders an opportunity to freely express their opinions about topics that are meaningful to them. For the host organization, listening to the dialog is a chance to reassess project objectives and goals.

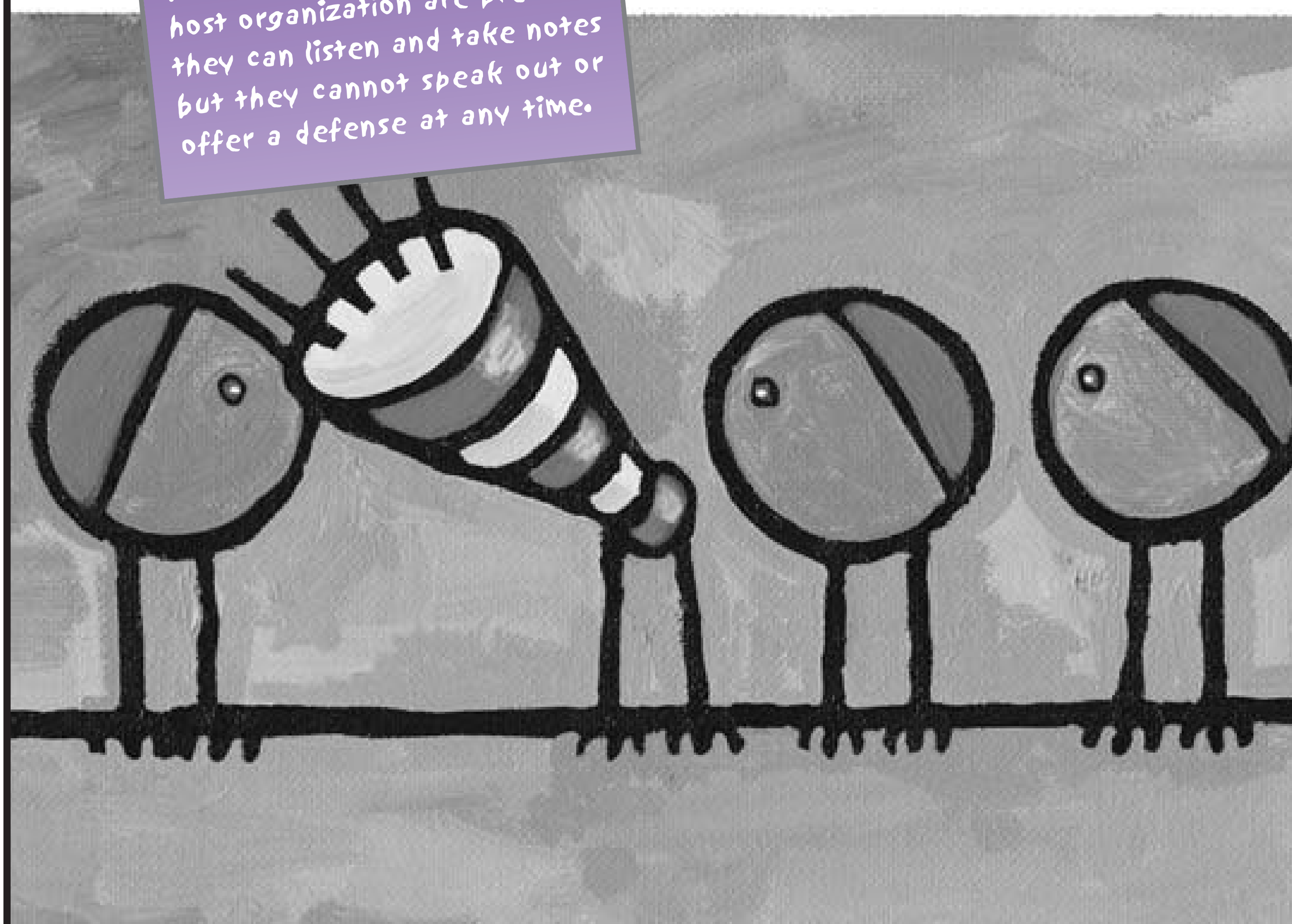
Keeping that in mind, a focus group includes these basic features:

- A carefully crafted agenda with five or six questions specific to only one topic.
- Brief presentation of material to set context and subject.
- Six to twelve participants who understand their role is to give personal insights and perspectives that will inform the planning process.
- Emphasis on gathering qualitative information such as perspectives and opinions.
- Informal but structured conversation and interaction among group participants.
- Facilitator's solicitation of, but not shaping of, opinions and perspectives.

TWO IMPORTANT POINTS:

(1) A focus group must be run by a professional facilitator who is not involved in the project and displays no bias towards the topic; and

(2) if representatives of the host organization are present, they can listen and take notes but they cannot speak out or offer a defense at any time.



HOW TO DO IT

1. Make an Agenda

Think of specific questions it would be helpful to have answers for—questions like "Is this really the most important way we can spend our budget?" Or "Do people really want a straight path or a circular route?" Or "Does anybody read this newsletter? Why/Why not?"

Do not be lured into trying to get a little information about a lot of things. Determine a single topic and ask questions directly related to it. Use open-ended questions about perceptions of the physical, natural and social environment or use focused questions about specific programs or projects and even types of behavior that may affect project viability. The focus group does not have to be limited to writing or speaking; creative approaches work well, e.g., "draw a picture of the river in your community." No matter what approach, keep the topic specific.

2. Determine the Budget

Running a focus group may incur costs such as facilitation fees and travel, possible compensation of volunteers, transcription materials and services, meeting space rentals, refreshments for focus group participants, and documentation and analysis of the results.

Creative financing may cover some or all of these costs. Consider in the following steps how to use volunteers or involve public agencies that do not charge.

3. Recruit a Facilitator

Take the tentative agenda and questions and get a professional involved. A nonbiased facilitator will be able to guide the interview design, advise on ways to collect the information and ensure the flow of dialog during the meeting.

Select a facilitator whose background indicates experience with focus group techniques and familiarity with thediscussion topic. Possible sources of assistance include marketing and advertising agencies, anthropology departments of universities, and government agencies whose planning programs require extensive public outreach.

3. Handle Logistics

Find a meeting place. It should be perceived as neutral and comfortable for all participants and easily accessible. Appropriate meeting places could include houses of worship and other community centers, conference centers, and even homes.

Pick a date and time. Schedules should be tailored to meet the needs of participants; e.g., evenings or weekends for those who work.

Arrange for light refreshments. If a budget is tight, this is an obvious place for volunteer assistance. If able, arrange for token gifts in recognition of the participants' time and help—ideally an item related to the topic being discussed.

4. Send out the Invitations

Either randomly select individuals from a broad-based mailing list or voters' registration list or specifically select individuals from a targeted interest group or from referrals. Again, information obtained from focus groups can guide or suggest possible future direction; it does not represent public opinion.

When inviting participants, whether through the mail or by telephone, supply details such as when, length of meeting, where it will be held (including directions) and a brief statement of the purpose. Focus group participants are never prepared in advance or coached to give specific answers—their immediate gut reactions to the facilitator's questions are much more valuable.

The optimal number of participants is 8-12. To have that many, it may require inviting many more people.

5. Legwork Before the Meeting

Help the facilitator prepare to introduce key opinion leaders or others in the community who are there to offer a short background on the project or topic and related issues. After the background, the individual should be asked to leave the room so as not to influence or intimidate discussions. Write out any guidelines or expectations for behavior; e.g., not interrupting others, not offering judgment, etc. This list should be posted in the meeting room.

Determine how the discussions will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The facilitator would most likely record and transcribe group discussions but additional professional assistance might be needed for the analysis.

6. The Big Night (or Afternoon, or Morning)

- Welcome and thank the participants and make necessary introductions.
- Explain how the results will be used.
- Assure the participants that the information gathered will respect the privacy of individuals.
- Review the ground rules including reminding any project members or those who are involved and are there to observe that they are to remain silent.
- Allow the facilitator to facilitate.
- Thank the participants.

Use It If...

- You need a reality-check and want to identify likes, dislikes and perceptions about a specific proposal, concept, tool, etc.
- You need a relatively inexpensive and easy way get feedback about something specific. With the right professional assistance, focus groups can be organized in a few weeks as compared to other methods of information gathering such as public opinion surveys.
- You want to reach a lot of different groups and compare their thoughts and ideas—have a focus group for community representatives, one for technical experts, one for a special interest group, etc.
- You need to reach under represented groups. Focus groups encourage people to speak out in an informal non-threatening forum without fear of criticism.

Forget It If...

- You need a comprehensive public outreach program. Focus groups supplement quantitative or technical information gained from using other public outreach techniques. Focus groups provide qualitative responses and are not statistically representative of the larger community or society as a whole.
- You want to build consensus. Focus groups are about gathering specific viewpoints of individuals or the groups they represent. Focus groups are not for debating issues and coming to agreement.
- You are looking for a way to "sell" your idea. To do that would take intervention in the conversation and that goes against focus group rules. The goal of a focus group is to obtain individual opinions, not distribute information or persuade others.

Timing is Everything

Focus groups can be used throughout the planning process.

- Run groups before a project begins to aid in developing a public involvement strategy.
- Run groups during the planning to gauge changes in public opinion and reassess the project direction.
- Run groups as a follow-up to the planning project to assess the success or failure of a given strategy.

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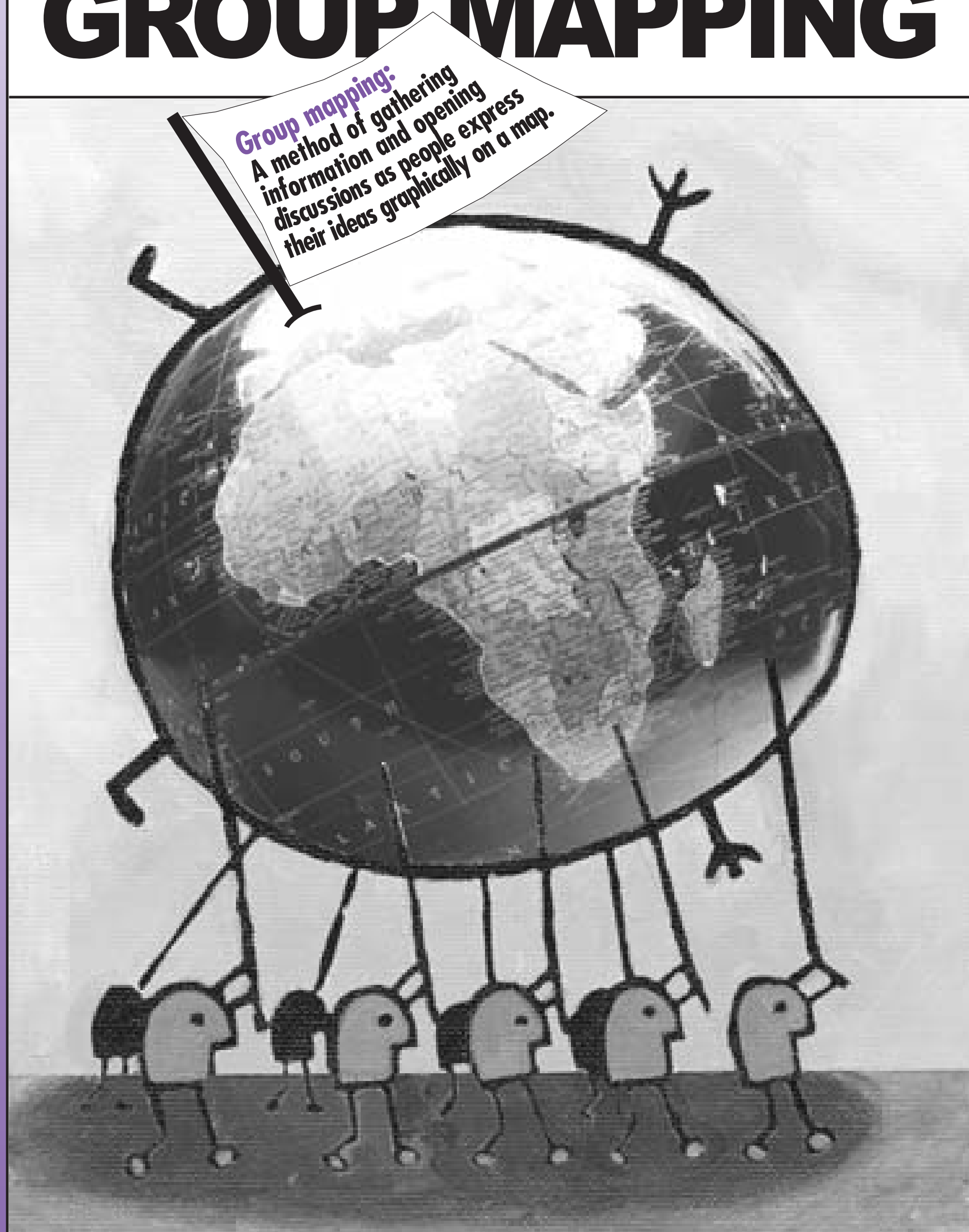
GROUP MAPPING



What We've Found

Group mapping is a creative approach for collecting feedback, ideas, and information. It can help people discover more solutions than first thought possible; it can also reveal more conflicts. It gives people the opportunity to visualize a resource in a different way, and sometimes we find that is helpful for making a project feel more real—which, in turn, can strengthen support.

JUST THE FACTS

Participants create a group map with tools (markers, pencils, colored paper) using a large-scale map of their area. A question is asked, and instead of responding verbally, everyone responds by drawing on the map often using a pre-defined key of colors or symbols.

There are three common types of group maps:

Memory maps:
recording how a place used to look.

Resource maps:
identifying specific sites such as historic, geologic, recreation facilities, etc., as the first step in conducting a thorough inventory.

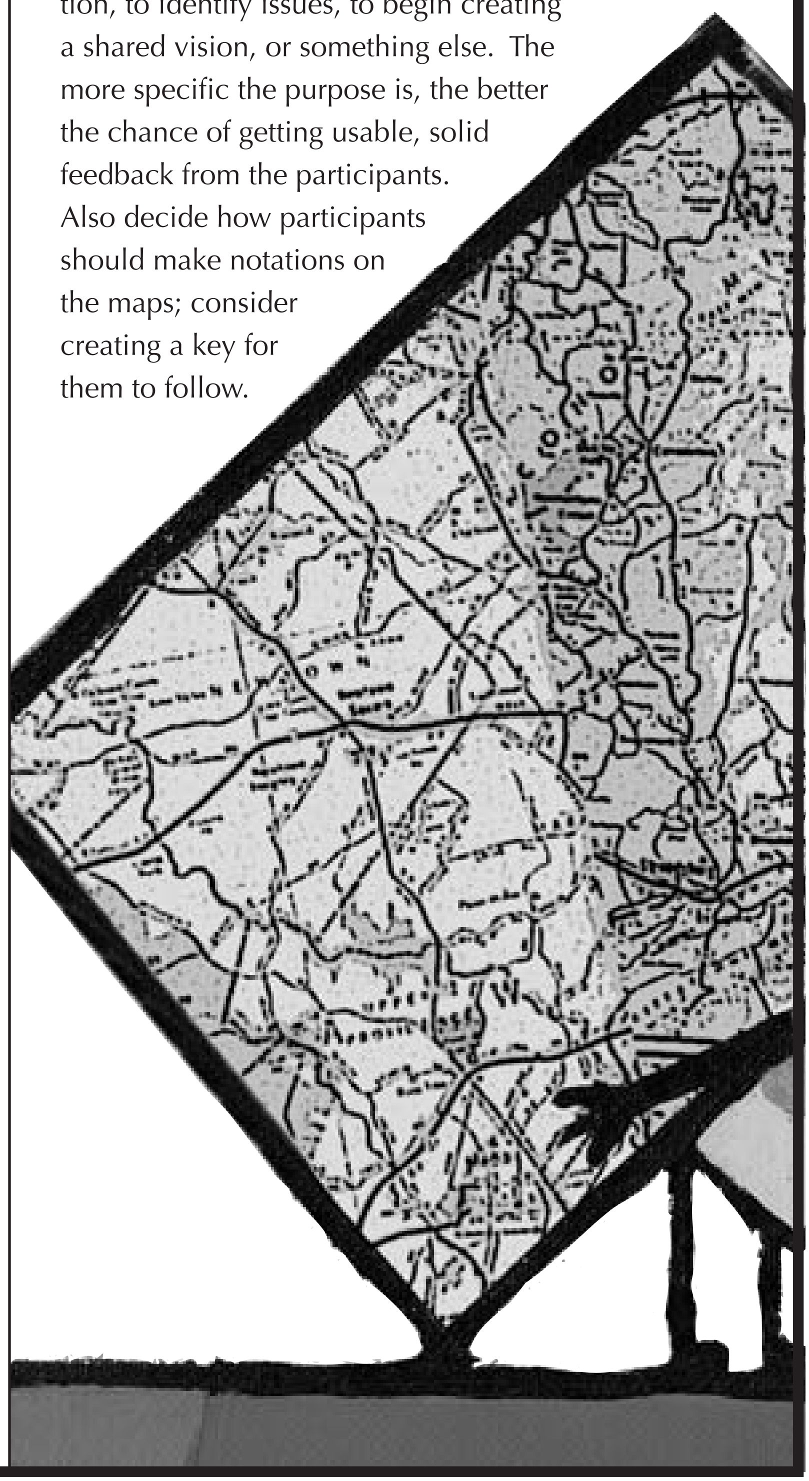
Wish list maps:
drawing future desires or ideas for trails, access locations, facilities, and protected areas for creating a shared vision or long-term plan.

While both group mapping and charettes result in creating a map or design for an area, the two are actually very different approaches. Charettes bring together professionals who are experts in their fields to focus on plans to improve an area. Group mapping involves volunteer community members and stakeholders who may or may not be field experts but have a valuable perspective and an understanding of the social and political aspects of a place.

HOW TO DO IT

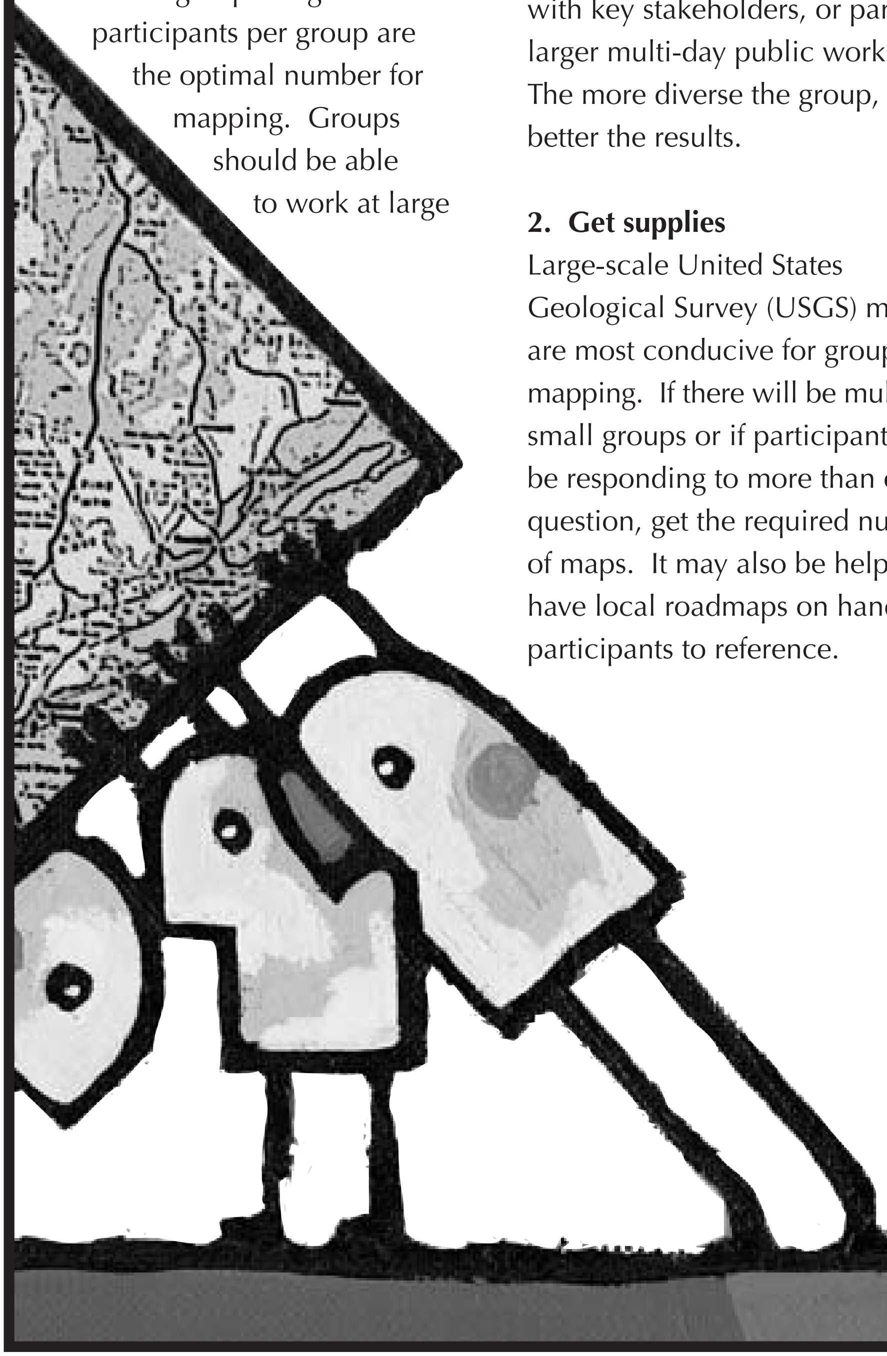
1. Define the need

Determine what the purpose of the group mapping exercise will be: to collect information, to identify issues, to begin creating a shared vision, or something else. The more specific the purpose is, the better the chance of getting usable, solid feedback from the participants. Also decide how participants should make notations on the maps; consider creating a key for them to follow.



2. Plan the meeting

Recruit a facilitator who may be a trained landscape architect, planner, historian, or resource expert or just a good facilitator. Find a facility. Depending upon the size of the group, it may be necessary to have space for breakout groups. Eight to ten participants per group are the optimal number for mapping. Groups should be able to work at large tables or at stations posting maps on the wall.



Logistics: set a date, create an agenda, potentially arrange for refreshments, etc.

Invite participants: This might ‘be part of regularly schedule task force meeting, a special meeting with key stakeholders, or part of a larger multi-day public workshop. The more diverse the group, the better the results.

2. Get supplies

Large-scale United States Geological Survey (USGS) maps are most conducive for group mapping. If there will be multiple small groups or if participants will be responding to more than one question, get the required number of maps. It may also be helpful to have local roadmaps on hand for participants to reference.

For recording, markers and pencils are necessary. Construction paper cut into assorted shapes and colors may also be used as a pre-defined key; the cutouts can be taped or glued into place on the map.

3. Get everyone going

At the beginning of the meeting or workshop, the facilitator should carefully explain the exercise and how the information will be used. Then give instructions including reviewing the map; some lifelong residents may have never seen a USGS map of their area before. Pose the question, or questions, give the time allotment, divide into small groups if applicable, and get people drawing and talking. It may be a good idea to have someone act as a recorder in each group.

4. Review together

After time is up, go over the map. Give everyone a chance to ask questions and further elaborate. If breakout groups were used, have all of the groups present their own maps and summarize their conclusions, findings, or recommendations. Discuss again how the information will be used.

Use It If…

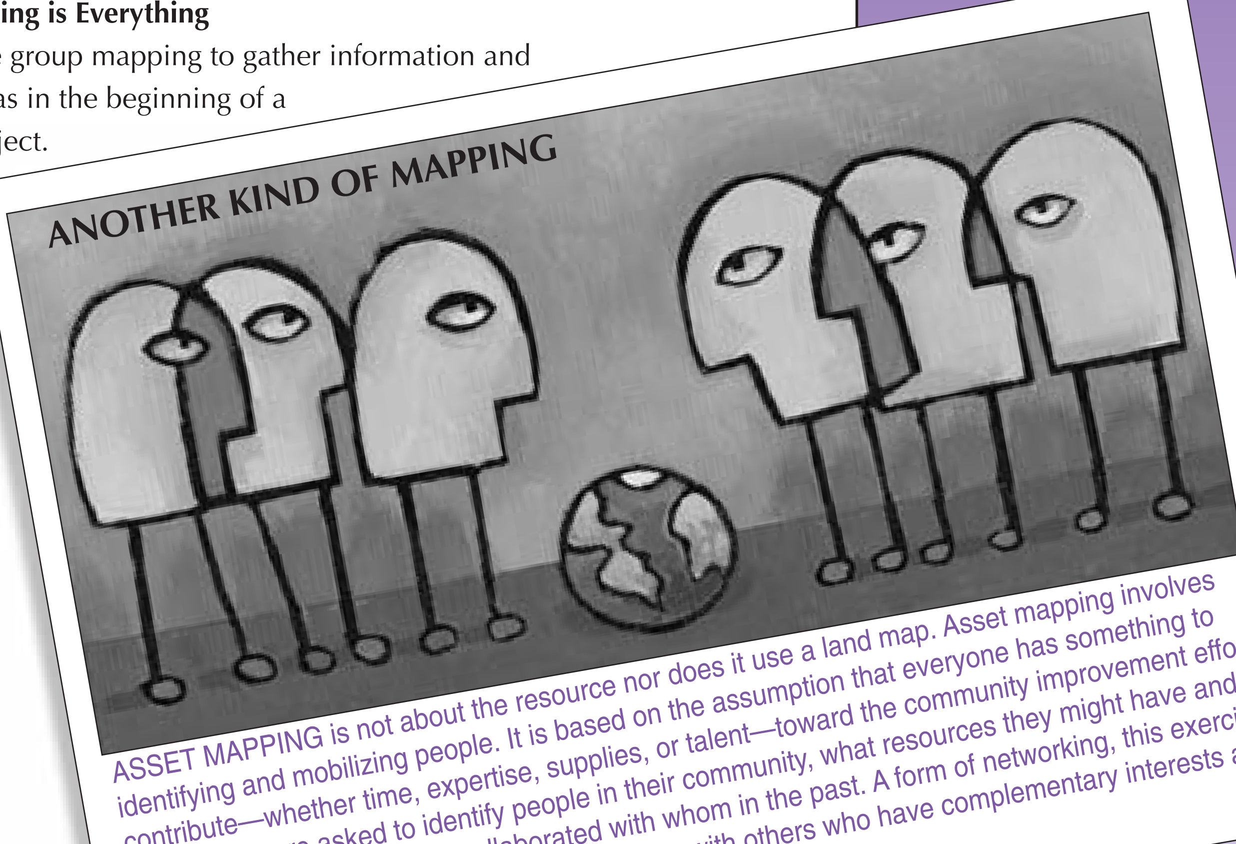
- You want to give everyone a chance to contribute to the discussion. Some who may not be comfortable speaking in front of others may be comfortable making a drawing on a map.
- You want to collect information in a more interactive, creative method and open dialog among group members.
- You would like to have a graphic image that shows a group's vision or the long-term plan of a project to use as a poster or in another publication or for presentations.

Forget It If…

- You have already gathered the information in another means such as an inventory, a survey, or other workshops.
- You do not have time to acquire large maps or have not developed a clear question for participants to answer.
- Your group is too large and you do not have materials for the number of necessary breakout groups or the facility cannot accommodate them.

Timing is Everything

Use group mapping to gather information and ideas in the beginning of a project.



ASSET MAPPING is not about the resource nor does it use a land map. Asset mapping involves identifying and mobilizing people. It is based on the assumption that everyone has something to contribute—whether time, expertise, supplies, or talent—toward the community improvement efforts. Participants are asked to identify people in their community, what resources they might have and their interests, and who has collaborated with whom in the past. A form of networking, this exercise can give people ideas about how to collaborate with others who have complementary interests and a willingness to explore joint endeavors.

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INVENTORY

INVENTORY:

A systematic gathering of information about or related to a resource or community.

WHAT WE'VE FOUND

Before we can decide what to do, we need to know what is there. That is the purpose of an inventory. An inventory should focus just on those places and things that make a community special and meaningful or that threaten and impact an area. All too often we have seen inventories become unwieldy, too exhaustive, too detailed. The ultimate test of the value of an inventory is how the information is used.

POINTS TO CONSIDER:

There should be a valid purpose or rationale for every item inventoried.

There needs to be a clear plan to address what happens to the resources that are identified, how will they be managed, how will their stories be told.

JUST THE FACTS

Inventories document natural, historical, cultural, archeological, recreational and scenic resources; public services; population and socioeconomic characteristics; facilities and transportation patterns or other information that affects the intrinsic value or negatively impacts a resource. An inventory is a combination of existing information, such as planning and zoning documents and study and research reports prepared by government agencies, universities and corporations. It also includes new information that is collected through interviews, field trips and surveys.

At the completion of the inventory, there should be a series of photographs and descriptions of important resources, maps that illustrate the location of those sites and statistical data on issues such as use, growth or socioeconomic trends. Conclusions need to be supported and documented. Good inventories bring credibility to a project or effort.

1. Identify the area and record findings

Mark on a map the area that will be included in the study. The best maps for this purpose are from the U.S. Geological Service (USGS). While USGS maps come in several scales, select the largest one possible so sites can be labeled and clearly read, but do not make the map so large that it becomes unmanageable.

Then start collecting information. Are sites or structures listed on an historical register? Is there documented habitat for any federal or state endangered or rare species? What is the water quality in a stream? What is the use of a park? These types of questions exemplify what needs to be asked.

As material is collected, consider inputting all information into a computer database. This can be an efficient means for storing, accessing, ordering and replicating information gathered.

2. Get folks involved

Recruit volunteers to work on the inventory both gathering information and reviewing it. Universities can often provide information and even students to help.

One good assignment is to have volunteers take photographs while on walks or bike or car trips. Provide people with maps so they can mark the locations of their photographs for future reference. These pictures may also be used later in audiovisual presentations to educate and engage more people.

3. Get the work out

Once the work is done, it cannot remain on a shelf forgotten. The inventory must be used to help people get to where they want to be in the years ahead. Creatively used, an inventory can be a powerful public involvement tool. Here are few ideas:

- Create posters with an illustrative map of the area or a large photograph that captures the place and a synopsis of the information in narrative. Sometimes these posters can be used as a bonus to new members of an organization or sold for fundraising.
- Produce a high-quality booklet with excellent photography, good illustrations and narrative explanations written for a non-technical audience.
- Develop audiovisual presentations targeted to different age groups and interests. Groups are often looking for speakers and will welcome a presentation at a meeting, whether slides or video.
- Publish findings and photographs on a web site.
- Organize an event such as a tour in the area that was inventoried. Point out significant findings and summarize highlights. The people who need to support a project may not be familiar with the location; take them to it.

It may be necessary to complete a detailed document especially for large and complicated projects or to satisfy legal requirements. If financial resources allow, there should also be an eye-catching, easy-to-read summary to share with the community.

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Use It If…

- You are looking for something to attract people to your cause or organization. Publishing results of an inventory can give you positive exposure and provide a community with educational information that interests them.
- You need to develop a vision and you want it based on the resources that are important to that community or resource.
- You want to create a database of information about a community or resource that can be continuously updated serving many different purposes.

Forget It If…

- You do not have an identified scope of what information should be collected. Without a clear scope, inventories can quickly become unwieldy in terms of the level of information being collected, the time it takes and the money it costs.
- You cannot get cooperation from resource experts in government agencies or universities. Experts are needed to help interpret data and add validity to results.
- You find that not having a finished inventory is a roadblock to making other decisions and taking action.

Timing is Everything

Inventories should be done at the beginning of a project. If a project expands or more information is needed during later stages, add to an inventory then.

COMMUNITY TOOL BOX

PHOTO INVENTORY

WHAT WE'VE FOUND

Conducting a photo inventory can have tremendous benefits. Through film, people can express their visual preferences and become more aware of what is important in their community. It can aid communication as pictures assure people are talking about the same place or thing. It can also be a tool for people to "vote" on what they like best. Most of all, the power of this technique is that it gives the broadest range of age groups, from senior citizens to children, an opportunity to be involved and have a creative voice.

PHOTO INVENTORY:

Documenting on film the special places and features of a community or resource.

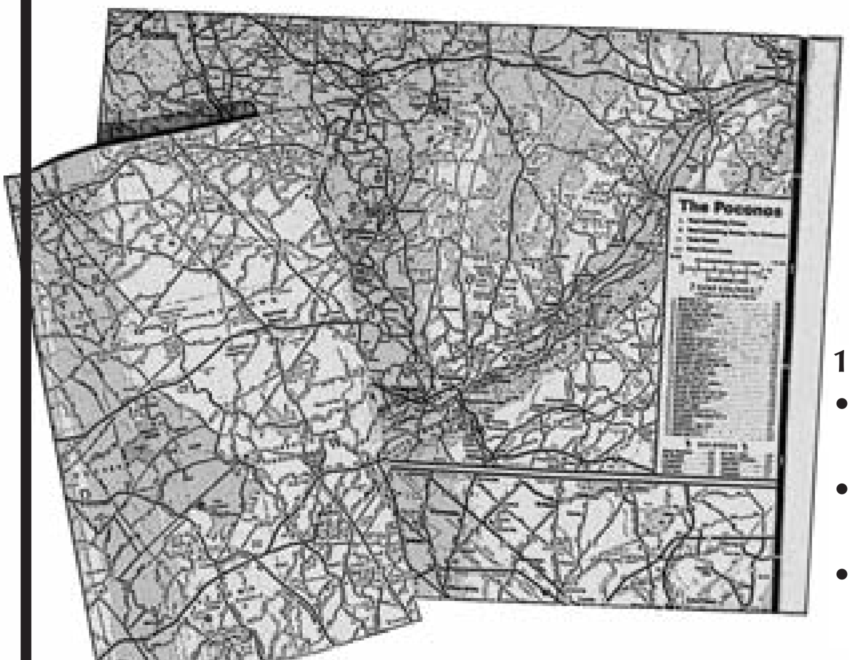
Single-lens reflex cameras will generate the highest quality images. If a group has access to the appropriate technology, digital cameras can be used. Polaroid cameras and single-use (disposable/ recyclable) cameras are also options but they will produce pictures of lower quality.

JUST THE FACTS

Photo inventories can capture specific sites such as historic, geologic, cultural, and recreational. They can be used to document natural resources, habitat areas, migratory paths, and feeding areas. They can be used to show issues such as inappropriate development, point-source pollution sites, or degrading structures. Photos can visually capture the entire resource area, both its positive attributes and its negative ones.

Besides being included in an inventory report, the photos can be used as part of displays, as slides in presentations, in pamphlets and newsletters, on websites, and even for posters. The images are versatile communication elements that can increase visibility and public awareness and knowledge.

HOW TO DO IT



1. Gather materials

- Cameras, if using a 35mm or single-use camera, use 100 or 200 ASA color film
- Topographic and road maps of the project area
- Foam core boards, approximately 3x5 feet in size, for mounting photographs

2. Recruit photographers

Place an ad in a local newspaper; seek students from a photography class at a college, university, or high school; ask for volunteers at a public meeting; or put up signs in public spaces. Also consider asking local professional photographers to volunteer their services in exchange for supplies and credit on any images published.

3. Host a meeting

Assemble everyone together to define the goals and review the area that will be covered. When they go into the field, have them mark on maps the exact locations where they took their pictures. Suggest they also keep logs recording why they took a particular shot. Finally, unless it is a one-day event, be sure to give everyone a deadline for finishing keeping in mind local weather forecasts.

4. Displaying an inventory

Initially have all of the photos developed in a uniform size. Based upon the goals for the photos, have the group define appropriate categories. Then have participants sort their images accordingly. Individuals may write brief statements about each photo. Develop a chart and count how often a feature or view was photographed. Again, depending upon the goals of the inventory, discuss next appropriate actions and brainstorm ways to use the pictures to reach wider audiences.

Use It If…

- You want a fun way to get new people of all ages involved in a project and thinking about a resource.
- You are ready to launch the inventory phase of a project and want people excited and involved.
- You plan on producing different print or electronic publications and will need photos.

Forget It If…

- You lack time to organize, take and develop photos, then sort and analyze them.
- You do not have the resources, either volunteers willing to use their own cameras and film or the financial resources to purchase single-use cameras and pay for developing.
- You want to document issues in a controversial project. People may take offense if their property is photographed and thought to be in need of improvement or unattractive.

Timing is Everything

Photo inventories should be in the beginning of a project.

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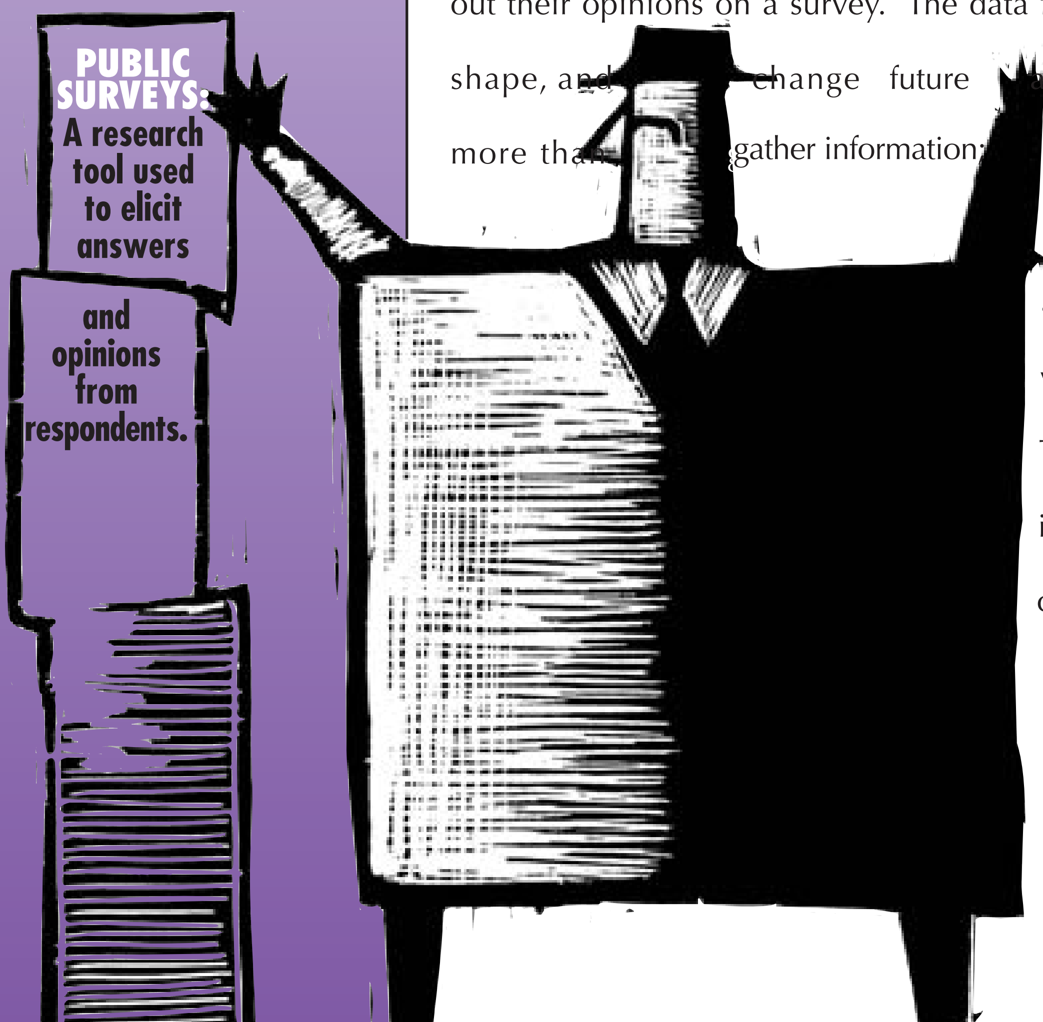
PUBLIC SURVEYS

WHAT WE'VE FOUND

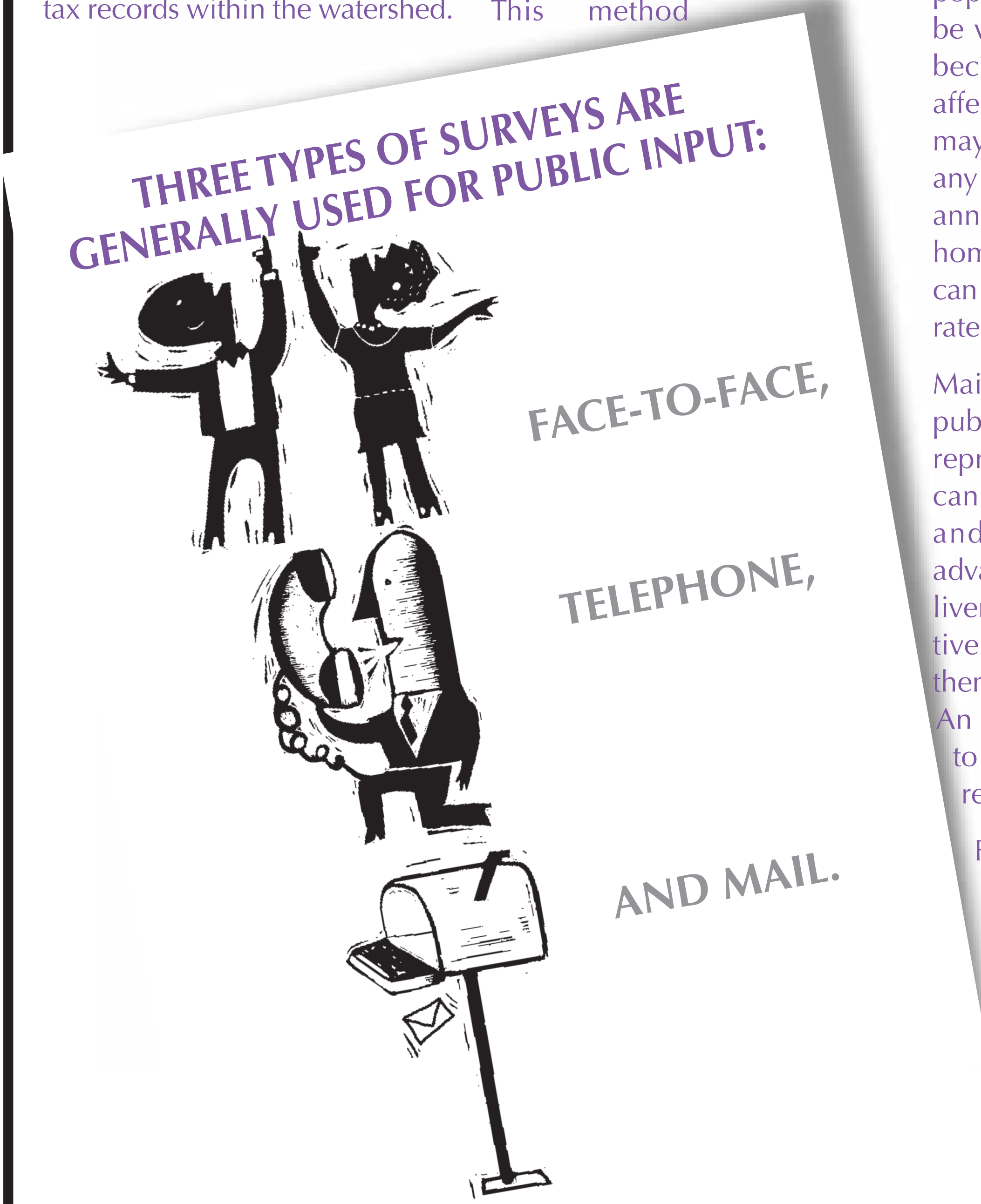
We may think we have chosen the best ideas or plans for a community or resource only to find ourselves facing opposition. To avoid that situation, first ask the people who live, work, and recreate there. Find out their opinions on a survey. The data from surveys can guide, shape, and change future actions. Surveys do even more than gather information; they help inform people about a group's ideas and build support for what is being considered. They can also help identify opposition before controversy erupts.



JUST THE FACTS

Surveys assess the attitudes of a random sampling of a target population. An example is a survey to learn about landowners' attitudes concerning recreational, historical, and natural resources in a watershed area. Residents are chosen at random by a computer sorting property tax records within the watershed.

Three types of surveys are generally used for public input: face-to-face, telephone, and mail. Face-to-face surveys are best for specific user groups such as paddlers, hikers, campers, etc. An interviewer can go to where people use that resource such as a boat launch, a trailhead, or a parking area. This method requires having a number of competent interviewers and there can be a high refusal rate to answer questions, as people do not want to take the time.



Telephone surveys are a good method for reaching a very specialized segment of the population. This group tends to be very interested in the topic because the results directly affect them. Even so, people may not be willing to answer any questions because they are annoyed at being contacted at home. Answering machines can also cause a lower response rate.

Mail surveys enable soliciting public input from a large and representative group. Surveys can be distributed at meetings and large gatherings. Their advantage is that they are delivered directly to the perspective respondent who can fill them out at his or her leisure. An easy to return mailer helps to encourage respondents to reply.

For mailed surveys, the percentage of people who reply, called a response rate, is very often fairly low. Most surveys are considered successful if the rate falls between 12–20 percent.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Scope it out

Determine the goals for a survey. What information is not known that needs to be known? Or, what is the reaction to a proposal or plan? Figure out ahead of time exactly how the information will be used: Will the survey measure attitudes? Will it demonstrate support for or against proposed actions? Will it solicit opinions about the value of resources? This is also the time to determine a survey method (face-to-face, telephone, or mail) and the target audience.

2. Get professional help

Seek assistance from a college or university professor or an experienced professional company or agency to design the survey and guide the entire process. Consider the following when developing questions:

- Compose questions in reference to the statement or hypothesis.
- Know exactly how the answers to each and every question will be used or else do not ask it.
- Make the survey brief, concise, efficient; avoid jargon or technical language.
- Limit the number of fill-in-the-blank questions. This will increase the response rate and encourage participants to give more thought to the ones that remain. People's comments, even though they are anonymous, can become possible testimonials used in brochures, pamphlets, etc.
- Pretest questions using a small, outside group who has not been involved in the project.
- Make sure the survey is understandable and clear. Revise as necessary.

3. Design the package

Assume that the person who receives the survey has never heard about the project or planning effort underway. Include a letter of introduction, ideally from a community leader or local task force chairperson that explains the purpose of the survey and appropriate background. There should be clear, easy-to-read instructions, and an enveloped or other pre-paid postage return mailer. The survey should be user-friendly and visually attractive, easy to approach, inviting, definitely not off-putting as in dense, small-font text with lots of printing, etc.

4. Distribute it

Make sure the sample audience is representative of the entire population within the project area or is targeted to users of a specific site. For landowners, rely on tax records sorted randomly by a computer. Again, it is important to use an outside agency or academic institution that is experienced and impartial. It may be desirable to send out postcards a week after mailing the survey to urge people to respond and to than those who already have completed the survey. The decision to do a follow-up mailing can be based on rate of return. For example, if the return rate is less than 3 percent then do a mailing; if it is greater than 3 percent, do not do the mailing.

5. Summarize the findings

Again, rely upon a professional to tabulate responses and present the data. Then prepare a question-by-question report of findings and a brief interpretation.

Create a report, a pamphlet, or an executive summary, post findings on a web site, or chose another method to publicize the results. If respondents were promised copies of the final tally, mail those in a timely manner. Coordinate all actions with issuing a press release that highlights the results and lets people know they were heard.

Use It If…

- You need to get feedback and information from a broad cross-section of people.
- You are looking to increase awareness of your effort and to encourage people's participation.
- You want to establish credibility for your public involvement efforts. If the survey is carried out professionally and the results are published and used, that can positively affect people's opinions and raise interest levels.

Forget It If…

- You cannot get trained, experienced professionals to manage and tabulate results.
- You do not have the time necessary for the entire process or lack the financial resources to pay for its production, mailing, and tabulation.
- You have not defined the scope of the information you want to collect or you do not know how to use the information once it is collected.

Timing is Everything

Undertake a survey at the beginning of a project to involve the public and collect a lot of data. If there is a particularly controversial issue or an expansion of the scope of the project that needs more community input, consider using a survey again later on.

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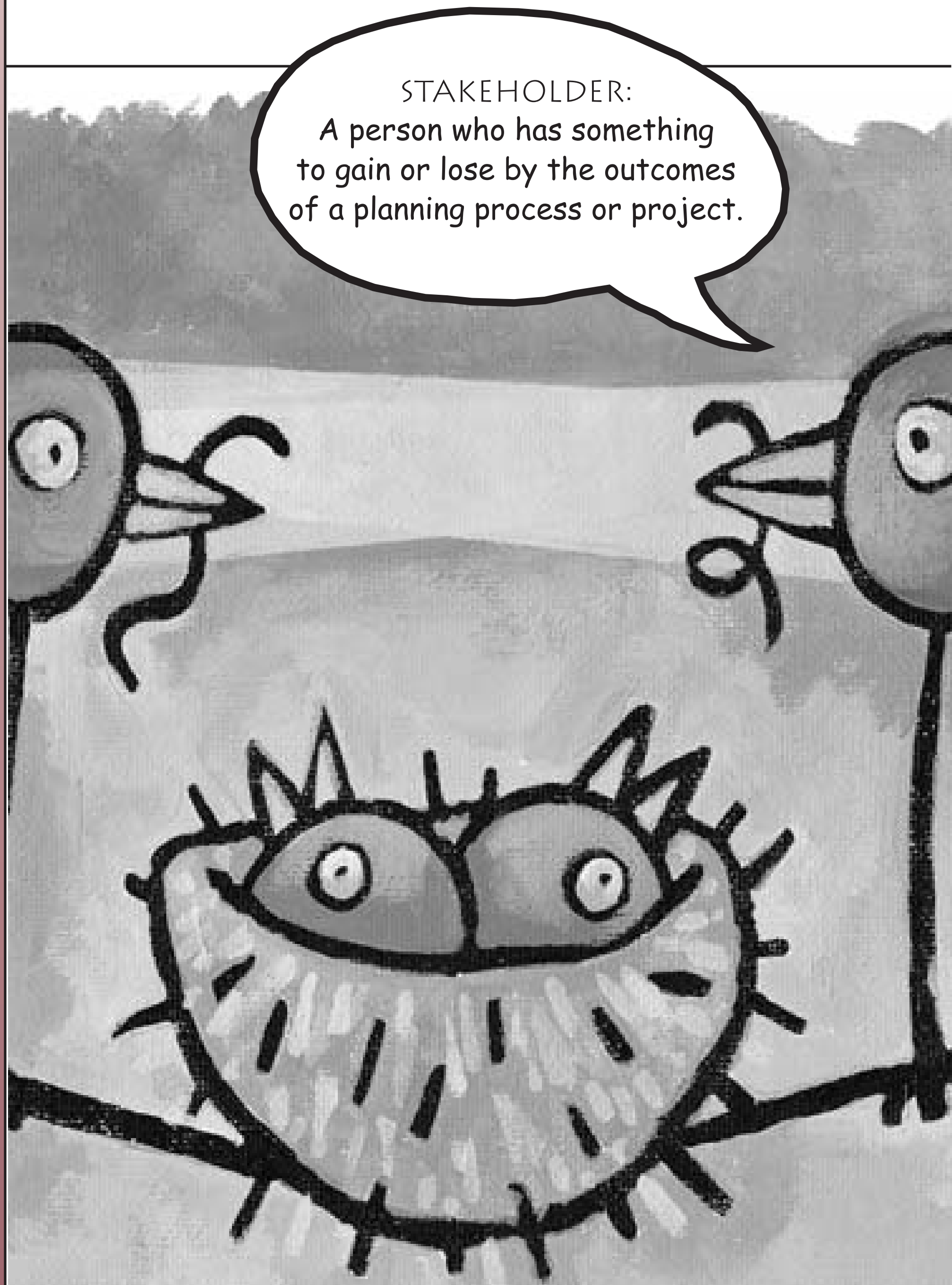
STAKEHOLDER



WHAT WE'VE FOUND

There are two overriding reasons to identify and involve stakeholders in a planning process. One is that from stakeholders, you can get values-based information: find out what is important to whom and why it is important. This needs to be taken under consideration along with factual information obtained from studies, data, and resource experts. Second, we find the end result is more likely to have broad-based approval because, if stakeholders are involved throughout the process, the final recommendations represent compromises among potentially conflicting objectives.

JUST THE FACTS

Business people, elected officials, landowners, conservation groups, recreation groups, historical and cultural groups, and other individuals and organizations who have an invested interest or involvement in what happens to a resource are all stakeholders. They will either benefit or suffer from what is being proposed. In the case of elected officials, the project impacts their constituents.

A hypothetical example of two stakeholders is a canoe group and landowners. If the project proposes increasing the number of access points to a river, that may benefit a canoe group but be perceived as a detriment to riparian landowners. By identifying and including both of these stakeholders in the process, there is an opportunity to better understand the community's needs and diffuse potential proponents of a project.

It is valuable to keep stakeholders involved whether informally or by asking them to participate on a task force, advisory group, or steering committee. Never assume an individual's or group's position, whether positive or negative, based on past affiliations, political standings, or other activities.

HOW TO DO IT

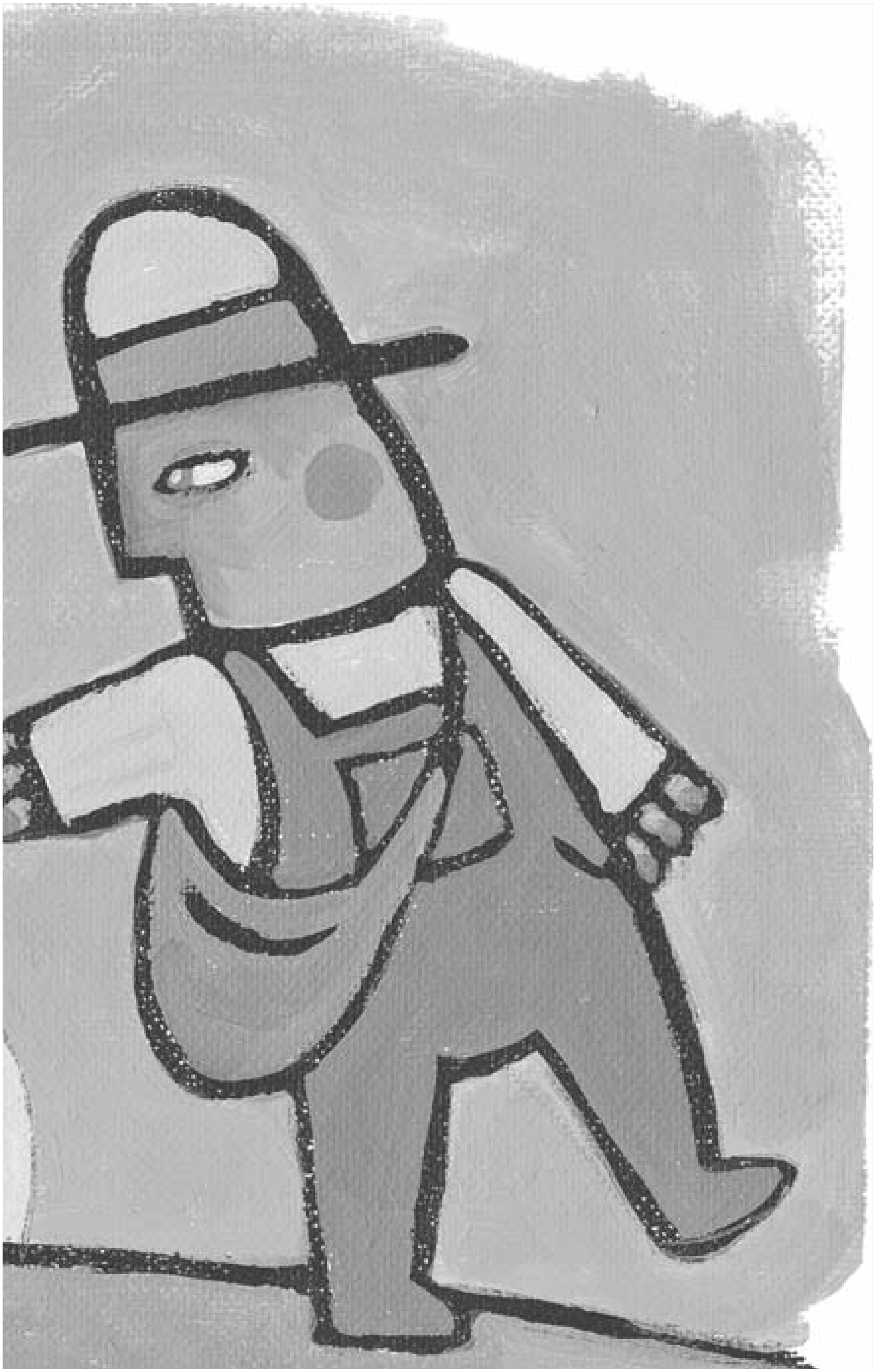
1. Make a list

Look at key resources, issues, current and potential users, businesses, traffic patterns and anything else that will be affected by the planning process. Then list people and organizations that have a related interest and/or current involvement. This can include neighborhood, civic and cultural groups in the project area.

Also remember to list affected elected officials: mayors, county council members, borough supervisors, municipal leaders, state legislators, governors, and U.S. representatives and senators. Make special note of key players, and be sure to include those who may oppose the project as well as those who are likely to support it. Check the list with other people to get their input.

2. Create a strategy

Decide ahead of time what you want from each of the people and organizations. Is it to keep them informed and seek their support? Do you want them to appear or speak at a special event? Do you want access to their mailing lists? Do you need their support for funding or want them to participate on a task force? Identify who will make each contact, when, and if, or how often, there will be follow up.



3. Prepare to meet
Make appointments to meet with individuals or key contacts within an office or organization. You may only have a few minutes to speak, so prepare in advance short statements that address important issues. This includes information about your project, what you want from them, and how involvement may benefit them. Leave behind flyers, newsletters, or brochures that explain the project in more depth.

4. Keep in touch
In addition to any group mailings, personal letters and phone calls will keep the project on the front burner. This is especially true for elected officials.

Use It If…

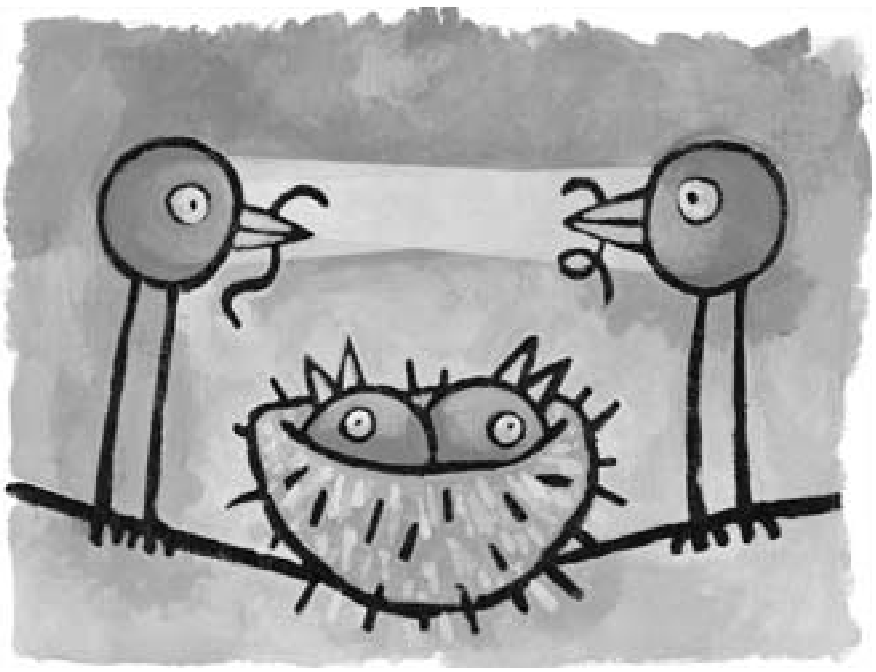
- You want to build consensus among people who have different viewpoints.
- You are building a strong, inclusive public involvement campaign.
- You are trying to draw a lot of attention to a resource and its value in the community.

Forget It If…

- You cannot find anyone who has an invested interest in the resource or the process.

Timing is Everything

Identify stakeholders early, even before a project is publicly launched. Reconsider the list as the process continues and more is understood about the community and the resource.



WORKING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

Elected officials want to know what is going on in their districts, towns, counties, and states, and they want to hear from their constituents. That is why it is important to share information about a project. Contacting elected officials may also be the only way to access public funds or in-kind government agency assistance. Be sure to keep the officials informed, especially of any controversies or public opposition, and invite them to participate in events, ribbon cuttings, awards, signing ceremonies, etc.

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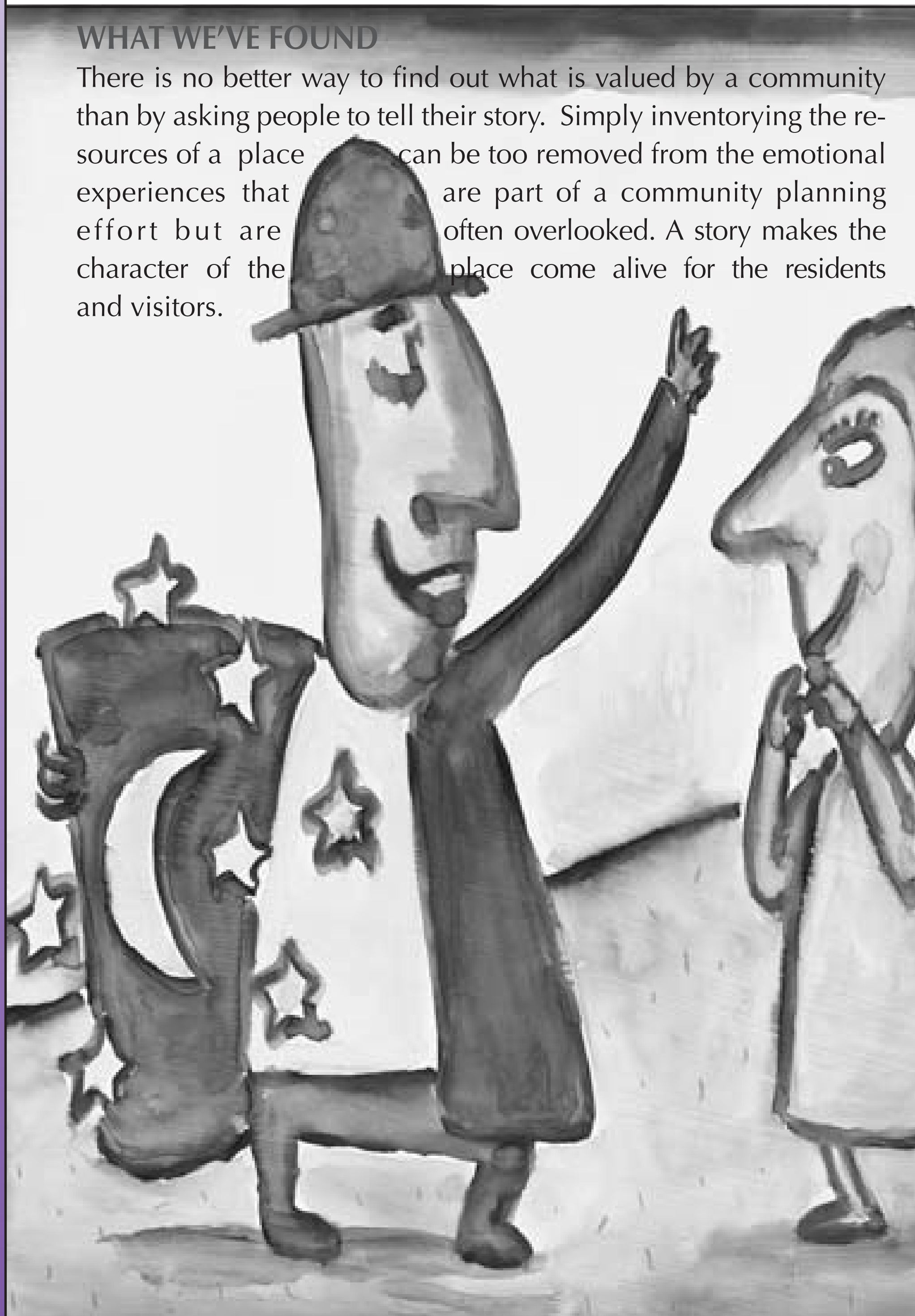
COMMUNITY
TOOL BOX

STORYTELLING

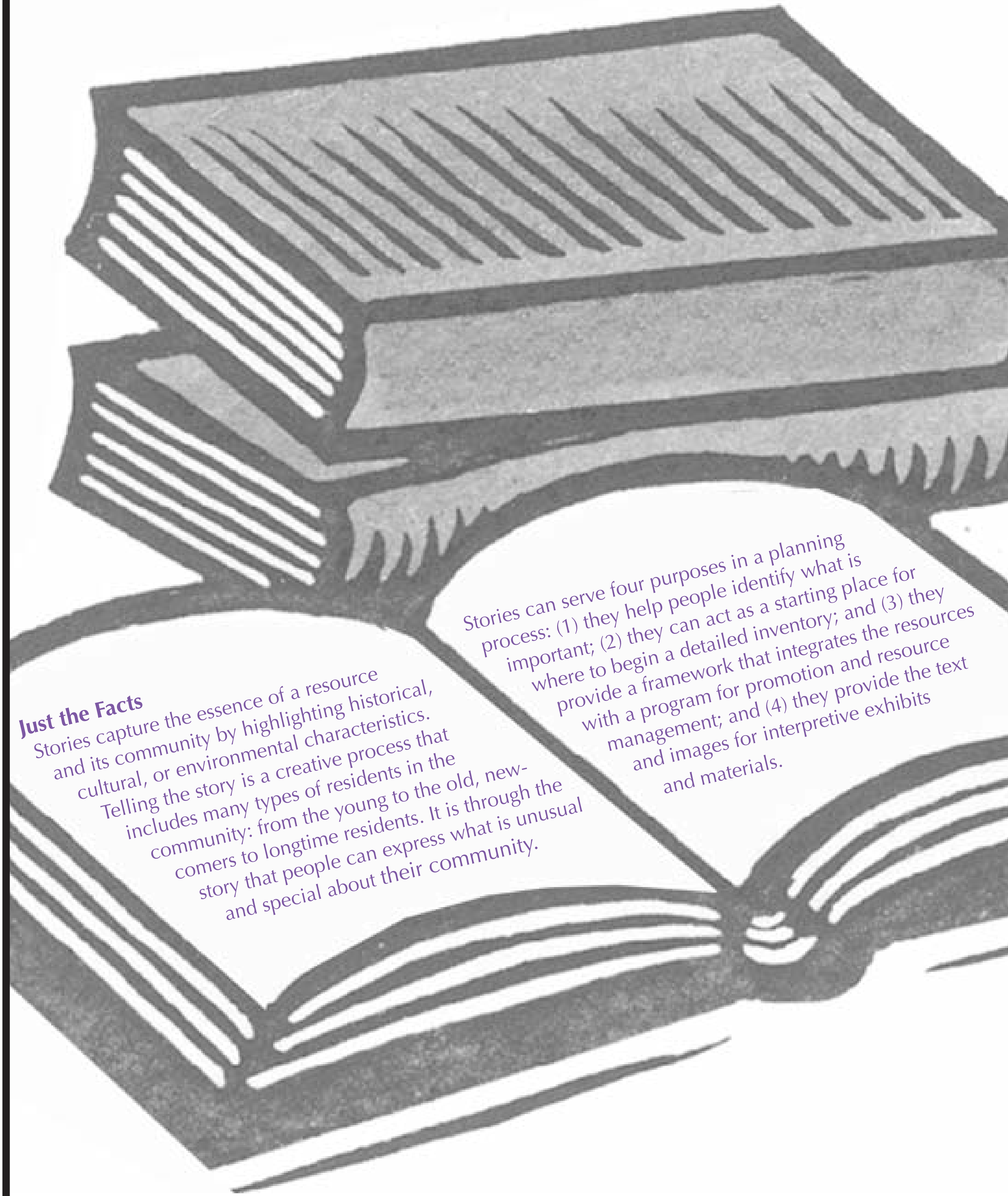
WHAT WE'VE FOUND

There is no better way to find out what is valued by a community than by asking people to tell their story. Simply inventorying the resources of a place can be too removed from the emotional experiences that are part of a community planning effort but are often overlooked. A story makes the character of the place come alive for the residents and visitors.



Story Telling:

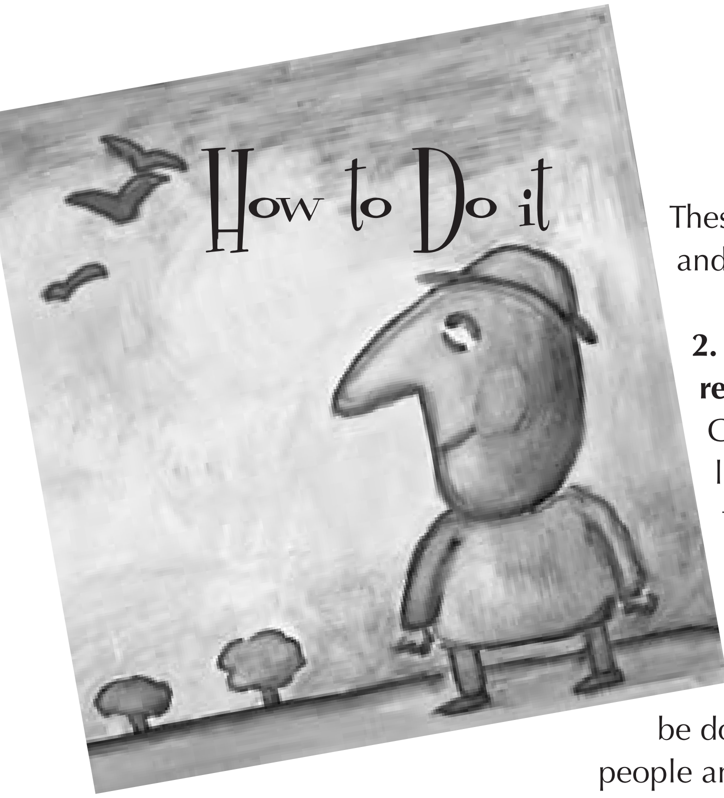
Capturing what is important, interesting, and meaningful about a particular place then relaying it to others.



Just the Facts

Stories capture the essence of a resource and its community by highlighting historical, cultural, or environmental characteristics. Telling the story is a creative process that includes many types of residents in the community: from the young to the old, new-comers to longtime residents. It is through the story that people can express what is unusual and special about their community.

Stories can serve four purposes in a planning process: (1) they help people identify what is important; (2) they can act as a starting place for where to begin a detailed inventory; and (3) they provide a framework that integrates the resources with a program for promotion and resource management; and (4) they provide the text and images for interpretive exhibits and materials.



1. Discover it through people
Create a list of 10 to 15 people who know a lot or hear other people's stories such as history buffs, longtime residents, amateur geologists, folk culturalists, and politicians.

Ask them what stories or facts are most interesting about the people, land, and history of that area.

Public meetings can also offer important opportunities to find story ideas that have support from the community. Simply ask people to think about what is great about their community and how they would recommend telling that story. These meetings can be fun and energizing.

2. Discover it through resources
Go into the field and look around. Take on the role of a tourist and, with fresh eyes, drive, bike, hike and see what is most intriguing. This can be done with a group of people and even be turned into a community-wide event.

3. Discover it through research
Go to the library or other research sites. Read up on local history, ecology, culture and issues. Also consult with experts such as state historic preservationists, local planners, university professors, cooperative extension agents and tourism professionals.

4. Validate it
Run a story by as many people as possible. See if they can connect to the place through it. This is also the time to confirm and enhance a story obtained from an individual or group with field inventory verifications and review of research documents and reports.

5. Tell it
Just like a story that is read, the story about a resource and its community should have a single theme and be organized with a plot, anecdotes, and a moral. Or it may be told in stages: conditions (context), challenges (tension), and resolutions (conclusion).

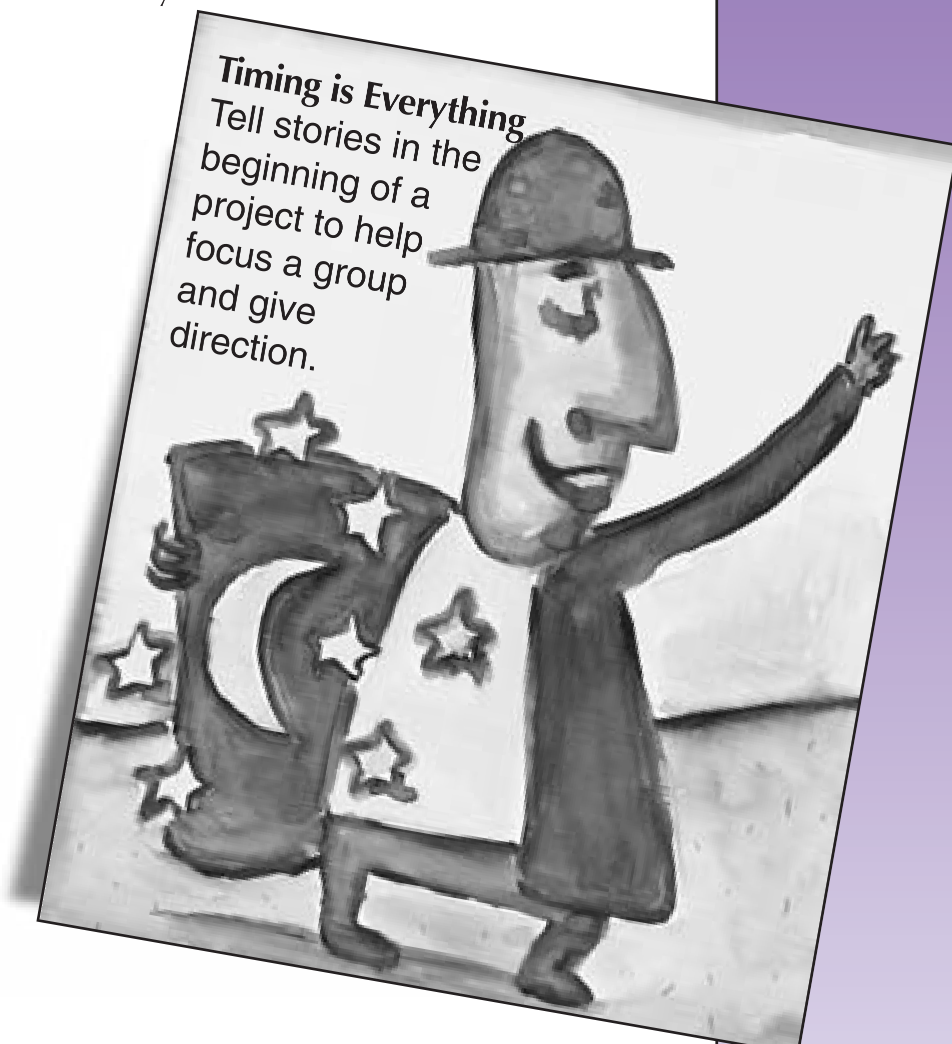
Share the story with others through narrative such as speech or slideshow presentation, in a pamphlet or other publication, as art, or even in song. How the story is told will depend on what the story is and who is telling it.

Use It If…

- You want to help people begin working together: An engaging story will serve as a unifying emotional and experiential tool.
- You are trying to develop a vision and need to first find agreement as to what people believe is important.
- You see people not engaged or too focused on the details of the inventory and losing sight of what is trying to be accomplished.

Forget It If…

- You need action. There's a clear, single threat people are ready to fight and telling stories slows down the response unnecessarily.



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