



# HOW TO RUN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Community meetings can be frustrating, long, and chaotic whether they're virtual or in-person. But yet, these meetings are often a required part of the planning and development process – and sometimes the only way people can influence what's built in their neighborhood.

Even though public meetings were designed to make the process more democratic, they are often derailed by misinformation, and hijacked by a small, but noisy few.

So how can we make these meetings a more successful, productive part of a community engagement strategy? This guide is designed to help you prepare for and host community meetings that are productive, positive, and powerful, so you can build better projects for the communities where you work.

We know all too well how community meetings can quickly become derailed. Our community engagement experts walk us through how to ensure that your outreach is productive so that you can build better projects for the communities in which you work.



## How Community Meetings Can Go Wrong

### Do you know what you're walking (or logging) into?

Developers often face community meetings with little knowledge in advance of the issues that may come up.

Though they may have met local planning offices, officials, civic leaders, and neighbors through door-to-door canvassing or meetings over coffee, the development team may not have unearthed all the concerns... until they unexpectedly come up at an open community meeting. The people that show up have deeply-held convictions, and they're eager for an opportunity to express themselves.

### Hijacked by the vocal minority

According to data from Boston University, 95% of people who attend public meetings about development projects are richer, whiter, and older than their neighbors. They are also typically frequent flyers at these meetings, showing up even when the projects aren't near their homes.

Though intended as an opportunity to hear from a broad cross-section of the community, open meetings often attract only a small, but vocal, minority of voices. NIMBYs with a long list of objections to the project can hijack the discussion.

Others in the community – folks that may be too busy to attend the meetings or those who don't know about the meeting in question - aren't heard from. They may be supporters with potentially useful input, but they're unable to attend a live session.

### Virtual meetings haven't solved this problem

In a survey of people who live in the U.S. conducted by coUrbanize in 2021, less than half (43.24%) of respondents have ever been to a community meeting. The majority of respondents (60.22%) agreed that virtual community meetings are more convenient than traditional, in-person meetings and 57.17% said the virtual nature would make them more likely to attend. But despite this, only 36.22% of respondents have attended a virtual community meeting since the start of the pandemic.



### Derailed by misinformation

Open community meetings can often be derailed by inaccurate information. Rumors, suspicions, or outright falsehoods that have circulated widely, usually helped by social media, somehow manage to come to the surface at community meetings.

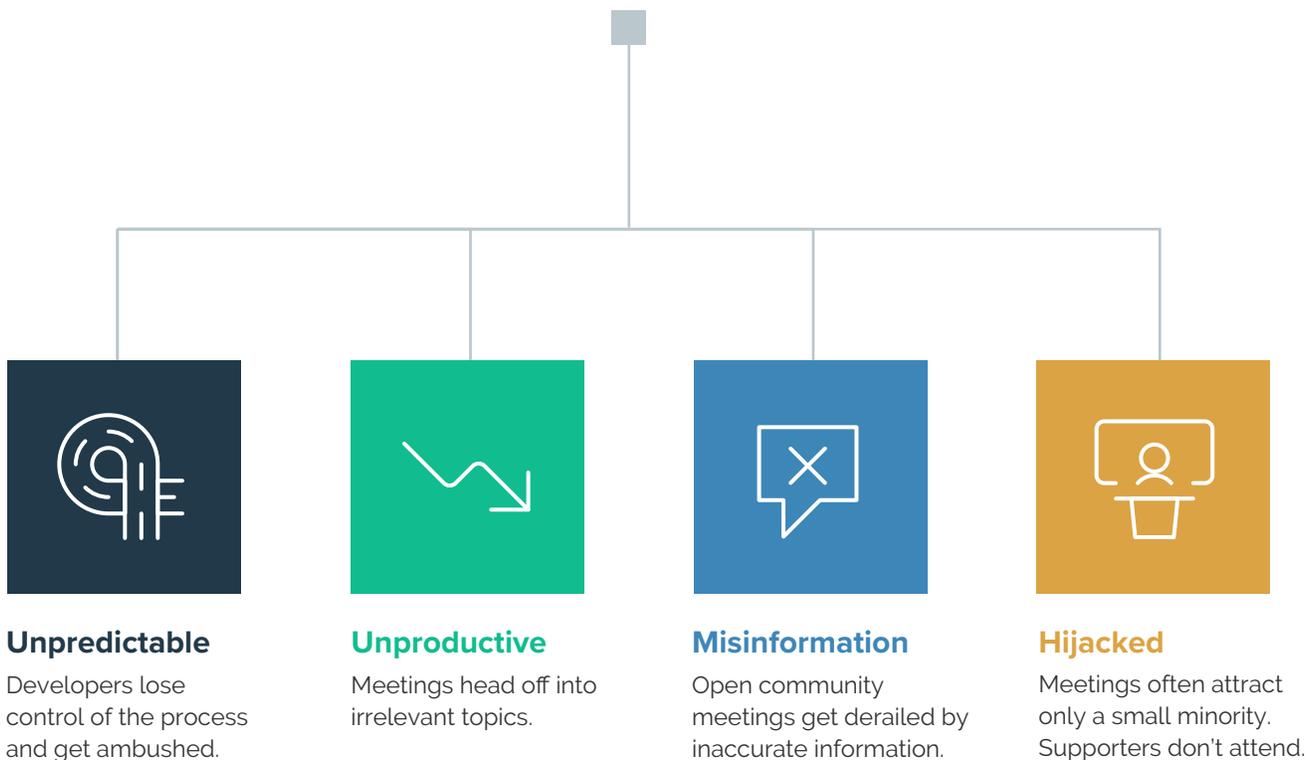
This dynamic immediately puts the meeting host and speakers on the defensive. Instead of collecting useful input or presenting concepts for the project, they're forced to correct errors, establish credibility, and steer the session away from inaccuracies and high emotions.

### The cost of community meetings gone wrong

Best case scenario: community meetings can provide valuable opportunities to collect useful input - information that could be helpful to building a successful project that is a welcomed addition to the community. The development team could learn more about the neighborhood's needs and preferences and make appropriate adjustments to the project plans.

But when the developers get ambushed, or meetings get hijacked or derailed, the discussions head off into irrelevant areas or go down rabbit holes. The chance to gather any useful input - something that could help the developer build a more successful project - gets lost.

## How Community Meetings Can Go Wrong



## Unproductive Community Meetings are Costly

The costs of unproductive community meetings, and poorly managed community engagement in general, can go beyond frustration or discomfort. They can have a significant negative impact on the cost and viability of a project. And over the longer term, they could harm the developer's reputation and shut off opportunities for future projects in the community.



### Back to Basics for Productive Meetings

It's doesn't matter if your meeting is in-person or online. These tips will help any public meeting be more productive and inclusive.

#### Broaden your outreach

Instead of operating from a place of fear and worry, bringing more people into the process allows you to curate data around real public sentiment about the project. The more you can communicate with people directly, the better.

#### Tackle discriminatory remarks head-on

Address inappropriate comments as they are made. For example, the inclusion of affordable housing in development proposals can sometimes stir up unfounded fears, but by being prepared with easy-to-understand information and explanations about what affordable housing really means, you can educate participants and dispel unfounded fears.



### **Communicate with people where they already are**

Share updates about your project where your audience already receives their information. Chances are, the community already has a neighborhood Facebook group that can be leveraged for communication. Channeling an update through a local elected representative or posting well-placed signs can both be effective outreach tactics.

### **Give people more than one opportunity to participate**

Public meetings are just one piece of the community engagement puzzle, but it's important to give community members more than one opportunity to attend a meeting. Hold multiple meetings, at different times, on different days, to help diversify who gets to attend.

### **Broadening Community Engagement Beyond the Public Meeting**

Fortunately, there are solutions that can help ensure more productive community engagement and reduce the risk of running into contentious and unpredictable open meetings.

### **Broadening Community Engagement**

Newer, sophisticated solutions support broader and more effective communication among community members, developers, and planners. They make it easier to gather input from everyone, including those that can't attend meetings and would otherwise be excluded.



These solutions also support two-way communications. Unlike a static website, for example, community members know that their concerns are heard, and they can get timely and accurate responses and updates.

## Controlled conversations

There's often a fear of doing community engagement online because of what happens on Next Door or in Facebook community groups. But community engagement platforms are designed to create more controlled conversations among community members, developers, and planners. Automatic spam filters and comment moderation filter out inappropriate content and support a more fact-based discussion and give the developer an opportunity to quickly correct misinformation. They allow teams to meet stakeholders where they're at - in their native language and without constraining participation to a single moment in time.



## Comprehensive reporting

The more sophisticated solutions let developers and planners generate comprehensive reports on community sentiment. The community and the approval authorities have a complete and concise record of all input in an easy-to-understand format, instead of just the opinions of a few heard during public comment periods at meetings.

Developers can take advantage of these new solutions to maintain more control over community meetings and the overall community engagement process. The result: fewer delays, less frustration, lower costs, and more successful projects.





## About coUrbanize

coUrbanize is an online community engagement solution for real estate developers and municipal planners. It helps them gain more control of the process and avoid surprises and miscommunication that lead to costly delays.

Using the coUrbanize solution alongside more traditional community engagement like public meetings for interacting with the community, developers and planners can ensure more open, accurate, and transparent communication and broader participation. As part of a holistic strategy and inclusive approach, we work with customers to identify voices that are historically underrepresented and the best ways to capture their feedback.

To learn more about coUrbanize or talk with a community engagement, reach out at [sale@courbanize.com](mailto:sale@courbanize.com)