



BUILDING COMMUNITY MOMENTUM

Turning worthwhile opportunities into informed leadership, credible support, and practical action.

Don't Let the Public Meeting Be the First Time They Understand the Project

Decision-makers need time to understand an opportunity before they are asked to evaluate it under public pressure.

A planning commission meeting is a terrible classroom. The room may be full. Neighbors are upset. The applicant has engineers, attorneys, maps, economic-impact numbers, and technical explanations. Citizens have questions, Google searches, social media posts, personal experiences, and strongly held concerns.

Sitting between them may be a five- or seven-member appointed board being asked to make a consequential decision. Some members may have experience in agriculture or business. Others may have little background evaluating capital investment, tax-base growth, infrastructure, land-use economics, environmental regulation, or the financial realities of a modern farm or business. Yet everyone expects them to absorb new information, evaluate competing claims, remain composed, and make a sound decision. **That understanding should have started long before the room filled up.**

1 Respect the difficulty of the decision

Serving on a local board is often a largely thankless job. A planning commission member may spend most meetings considering routine subdivisions, setbacks, signs, or variances. Then a major livestock facility, manufacturing operation, energy project, housing development, or other significant investment arrives. The decision may involve millions of dollars and consequences lasting decades. This does not mean board members are incapable. It means **the complexity of the decision may exceed their previous experience with the subject.** Good community leadership recognizes that gap and prepares people for it.

ASK YOURSELF: Are we expecting people to make decisions about economic opportunities we have never helped them learn how to evaluate?

2 Teach the economics before you need the vote

Economic development can sound abstract. If someone proposes a \$20 million investment, what does that actually mean locally? How much becomes assessed value? Which taxing bodies benefit? What infrastructure does it require? What kinds of jobs matter? Does it strengthen an existing industry? Does it help a farm bring another generation into the business? What are the public costs and risks? What happens if the project goes somewhere else? Board members do not need to become economists, but they need enough context to understand that a land-use decision can also be an **economic decision with opportunity costs and tradeoffs.**

ASK YOURSELF: Could our decision-makers explain in their own words why this project might matter economically - even if they ultimately decide against it?

3 Help them understand the project - not just the sales pitch

Education cannot become advocacy disguised as education. Leaders need to understand what the project actually does, what could reasonably go wrong, which regulations apply, which concerns are legitimate, what mitigation is available, what tradeoffs cannot be eliminated, and which claims are unsupported. For a livestock operation, that might include manure-management requirements, odor, setbacks, truck traffic, drainage, environmental oversight, animal numbers, operating practices, and the economics driving the proposed scale. The objective is not **'Here is why you should approve it.'** It is **'Here is what you need to understand to evaluate it intelligently.'**

ASK YOURSELF: Have we given decision-makers enough balanced information to distinguish a legitimate concern from a claim that merely sounds convincing?



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4 Give understanding time to develop

Complex ideas rarely become intuitive after one presentation. People need time to ask questions, think, talk privately, ask another question, see an example, visit a facility, hear another perspective, and sometimes change their minds. Once a project becomes emotionally charged, learning becomes harder because people interpret new information through positions they have already taken. Social media and quick internet research can provide enough information to create confidence without enough context to create understanding. Decision-makers need a deeper foundation. **Understanding built slowly is much harder for emotion to displace quickly.**

ASK YOURSELF: Have our leaders had enough time with this subject for understanding to become their own - or are we giving them talking points the week before the hearing?

5 Prepare them for the room

Understanding the project is only half the preparation. The other half is what happens when the chairs fill up. A citizen may begin with a legitimate concern. Then fear enters. Someone makes a claim, another person confirms it, a social-media rumor gets repeated as fact, people applaud, and the emotional temperature rises. Good board members should listen carefully, remain open to legitimate new information, and have empathy for people affected by their decisions. **But empathy does not require surrendering judgment.** Neither applause nor anger changes the underlying evidence. The board's responsibility is to make the best decision it can from the evidence, standards, tradeoffs, and responsibilities in front of it.

ASK YOURSELF: Have we prepared decision-makers only to understand the project - or also to remain thoughtful when understanding it becomes socially uncomfortable?

The Public Meeting Is the Test, Not the Classroom

Before controversy begins, decision-makers need context, economic understanding, project knowledge, time to examine tradeoffs, and enough exposure to develop their own judgment. The public hearing should then be a place to test that understanding against public input and legitimate new information.

CONTEXT	ECONOMICS	PROJECT	TRADEOFFS	QUESTIONS	EXPOSURE	UNDERSTANDING
Why does it matter?	What does it create, cost, and risk?	How does it actually work?	What concerns are legitimate?	What is not understood?	See examples and perspectives	Can leaders explain it themselves?

You don't want your board learning the project while the room is yelling at them about it.

LOBBYING ASKS

"How do we get them to vote yes?"

It starts with the desired outcome and works backward toward persuasion.

EDUCATION ASKS

"What do they need to understand to make a good decision?"

It builds the capacity to vote yes or no intelligently - and to explain why.

IS YOUR BOARD READY?

CONTEXT - Do they understand why the opportunity exists? What economic, agricultural, demographic, or market forces are driving it?

ECONOMICS - Can they understand the numbers? Enough to recognize investment, tax base, jobs, public costs, infrastructure implications, and opportunity cost?

TECHNICAL UNDERSTANDING - Do they know how the project actually works? Or will proponents and opponents be teaching competing versions during the hearing?

TRADEOFFS - Can they acknowledge costs without assuming every cost requires a no? Nearly every meaningful development creates some tradeoff.

EVIDENCE - Can they distinguish evidence from confidence? A confidently delivered claim is still only as good as the information supporting it.

EMPATHY - Can they hear someone's concern without automatically adopting that person's conclusion?

STEADINESS - Can they continue thinking when the room becomes angry?

If every person in the audience disagreed with them, would they understand the issue well enough to explain why they made the decision they did?

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Communities do not need elected and appointed leaders who automatically approve development. They need leaders capable of evaluating development well. The public hearing is where decision-makers should test what they understand against public input - not where they should begin trying to understand the issue.

AgStrat helps communities and economic-development organizations prepare elected officials, appointed boards, and other community leaders to better understand development opportunities, economic impacts, tradeoffs, and difficult public decisions. AgStrat also works with project leaders preparing worthwhile opportunities for the local approval process. To start a conversation, contact virgil@agstratsolutions.com.

Education | Understanding | Judgment | Steadiness | Momentum