EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many public policy-making efforts, such as comprehensive plans, zoning regulations, and neighborhood plans, depend on productive and collaborative public meeting processes. Yet such processes are often fraught with conflict among stakeholders, which can lead to delays or even derailment of the process.

Planners must design effective group processes for complex planning projects and are often called on to facilitate public meetings of various scales and types. Yet these skills are not taught in school.

PAS Report 595, A Planner’s Guide to Meeting Facilitation, provides detailed “how-to” instructions for designing and conducting group meetings, with a focus on the settings and challenges common to urban planners working in local government.

Authentic and active citizen participation is an essential element of local planning processes, and effective meeting facilitation is necessary to ensure that such public involvement is productive and successful. Effective facilitation helps participants work together and prevents discussions from breaking down into argument or dissolving in mistrust and disagreement.

When many residents are involved in discussing and formulating recommendations on controversial public policy matters, civil discourse is imperative but can be difficult to achieve without the knowledge and skill to properly design and conduct the meeting process. This report provides the key elements of that knowledge and the foundation for developing those skills.

This PAS Report offers valuable guidance to planners. It has two main aims:

1. Providing a thorough grounding in the fundamental principles and techniques of successful meeting facilitation.
2. Offering detailed steps for designing, preparing for, and facilitating group meetings of various formats, at both small and large scales. This includes specific information on practical details such as meeting logistics, ground rules, agenda design, legal and ethical issues, working with diverse populations, and the challenge of disruptive participants.

While this report emphasizes public planning contexts, the principles and techniques it shares are broadly applicable to a wide range of meeting and project settings, whether in the public or private sectors.

FUNDAMENTALS OF SUCCESSFUL FACILITATION

To successfully facilitate a group meeting, a facilitator must understand and uphold three basic principles: Gain and maintain the trust of the participants, remain neutral on substantive and procedural aspects of the discussion, and show respect to all participants at all times.

These “three pillars” of successful facilitation—maintaining trust, staying neutral, and showing respect—are critical for the facilitator to hold the authority to manage the meeting and help the group have a productive discussion. This report explains the importance of each pillar and offers guidance to help planners put these principles into practice.

A critically important—yet perhaps not intuitive—truth of facilitation is that the facilitator’s power comes from the consent of the group. The facilitator must share power to gain power; the meeting belongs to the group, not the facilitator. The facilitator is not so much leading it as managing the flow to ensure that it is smooth, fair, and moving forward.

Facilitation is a paradox: By giving up power to the group, the facilitator gains power to shepherd the group through its process. The group has the ultimate say over each part of the process, but it must decide with one voice in order to act. Thus, the facilitator is given the power to serve as a kind of referee or traffic cop to help the discussion move forward peacefully and productively. This report helps planners to understand this truth and act accordingly for successful facilitation outcomes.

MEETING SCALES, TYPES, AND CONSIDERATIONS

Meetings have a wide range of scales, from a handful of people up to several hundred or more. The basic core setting for applying facilitation techniques is the small group of up to about a dozen people. As groups get larger in size, techniques must be applied to manage the larger group in a way that allows all members to engage actively, fully, and fairly. These can include the use of breakout groups, written exercises, multiple meeting sessions, and other strategies.

This PAS Report examines the factors and issues involved in designing, organizing, and preparing for group meetings.
Chapter 2 examines all participants in the process, from a facilitator’s “clients” and stakeholders to other members of the facilitation team. It describes the key elements of both small and large group meetings and outlines the characteristics and specific facilitation considerations of various meeting types, including conference forums, open house meetings, charrettes, advisory committees, listening sessions, and focus groups.

Chapter 3 of the report addresses the legal and ethical considerations that affect all meetings and planning processes, and it examines the challenges of working with diverse groups. Public planning processes often involve populations that vary by race, ethnicity, cultural background, native language, economic class, age, disability, and other factors. Successful facilitation requires that a facilitator act not for, or on behalf of, a community, but rather work with that community to maximize the potential for a successful outcome. The report highlights the importance of leading inclusive facilitation processes in which all participants feel welcomed, respected, and heard, and offers guidance and strategies for overcoming potential barriers of access and inclusion for underrepresented groups.

PREPARING FOR AND FACILITATING GROUP MEETINGS
Designing, preparing for, and facilitating a group meeting can seem like a daunting task. Chapter 4 of the report walks planners through the basic steps common to all meetings and facilitation processes to help make this more manageable.

Preparing for a meeting requires the following steps:

1. **Determine the purpose and objectives of the meeting.**
   This can include obtaining public input to generate ideas, evaluate or review, build consensus on, or resolve conflicts for policies, plans, or actions. A meeting’s purpose—and its place in the larger planning process—influences design and agenda choices.

2. **Determine participation needs and methods of input.**
   Who is invited to attend? Who is allowed to attend? Who is recruited to attend? Outreach to commonly underrepresented groups can be a particular challenge in the meeting design process and should be carefully considered.

3. **Determine meeting location, date, and time.**
   This can be one of the most difficult issues to decide when planning a meeting. It is important that the needs of the expected participants, including cultural considerations, are fully taken into account to maximize participation and access.

4. **Provide advance outreach and notifications.**
   Researching the community, including reaching out to key local interests and stakeholders, is important to most effectively create and disseminate advance notification about the event.

5. **Design the meeting agenda and process.**
   This includes determining meeting purpose, start time and duration, roles of participants, ground rules for participation, timing and format of presentations and group exercises, and preparations for small group work. Sample agendas for a variety of meeting contexts are provided as an appendix to the report.

6. **Prepare meeting materials.**
   Meeting materials can include handouts and presentation materials, sign-in sheets, and evaluation forms. Facilitators should create two versions of the agenda: one to be provided to meeting participants, and an annotated version with detailed choreography of the process for the facilitation team.

7. **Prepare the meeting space.**
   The success of a meeting can also depend on its setup and setting. Meeting rooms should have adequate space, lighting, sound, ventilation, and access, as well as adequate furniture arranged in an appropriate room setup. Refreshments are also key to a positive meeting experience for participants.

Chapter 5 details the key steps in conducting a facilitated meeting, which include the following:

1. **Set up the meeting space.**
   Arrive early enough to ensure that the main room and any breakout rooms are completely and correctly set up. Allow plenty of time for surprises. A sample room setup checklist is provided as an appendix.

2. **Begin the meeting on time.**
   Being timely is a sign of respect for participants.

3. **Welcome the group, with introductions.**
   Depending on group size and context, introductions may range from simple showing of hands in response to questions relevant to the group or process to a round robin of attendees’ names, affiliations, and other helpful information.

4. **Review the agenda and proposed ground rules for the group to review and approve.**
   Share with the group the purpose of the meeting and the overall project, the objectives, and the priorities. The facilitator should review proposed meeting ground rules and obtain consent of the group for their use.

5. **Choose a recorder and reporter.**
   Ideally, the facilitator will be able to designate a recorder and reporter for the group. The recorder must quickly and accurately capture and write down the information generated by the group, while the reporter must accurately and concisely summarize and present that information back to the larger group.
6. **Explain the meeting objectives and present information.** Meeting objectives as well as transparency about the level of public power allowed by the process must be made clear to participants to avoid confusion later. Presentations should be timed and tracked to avoid taking up valuable discussion time.

7. **Initiate and manage the discussion.** Facilitators can use a number of group exercises to engage the group and obtain the desired feedback from participants, taking care to maintain the three pillars of facilitation throughout.

8. **Wrap up by summarizing results and adjourn the meeting on time.** Summarize the results of the discussions and thank participants for their time.

9. **Follow up by compiling and disseminating results to participants.** Following up with participants helps them know that their input was heard and encourages future participation in the planning process.

Ground rules are a critical meeting facilitation tool that provide firm guidance for the behavior of the participants to ensure that they are respectful and civil, stay on track to complete their tasks, and accomplish the defined objectives. The facilitator proposes a set of ground rules, but the group must approve those rules and agree to abide by them. The group, through the facilitator, enforces its ground rules during the discussion. Chapter 6 of this report offers a comprehensive set of sample ground rules for planners’ use.

Many meetings seek to deliver defined outcomes agreed upon by group consensus. Making group decisions by consensus helps build good will and trust among the participants and creates durable decisions with minimal renegoting. The consensus process also promotes the value of learning and empathetic listening and encourages self-reliance of the group. Chapter 6 defines various levels of consensus and describes two methodologies for reaching group consensus: the discussion and testing method and the nominal group technique.

**SPECIAL CHALLENGES OF FACILITATION**

Facilitation of public planning processes for local governments often produce special challenges that facilitators must navigate to perform successfully. One common challenge is handling difficult people.

Though most public meetings are attended by people who sincerely want to reach a successful outcome of the meeting and of the overall process, sometimes a participant may be disruptive, whether inadvertently or purposefully. Inadvertent disrupters do so unintentionally because of personal tendencies or habits; they may ramble at length or interrupt, argue with, orlecture other participants. Most inadvertent disrupters just want attention or want to be sure their voices are heard; Chapter 7 of this report provides suggestions for facilitators on how to productively incorporate them into the process.

In contrast, purposeful or strategic disrupters are consciously trying to undermine or discredit the process and so can present a greater challenge. Chapter 7 also offers guidance for facilitators on proactively preparing for and managing strategic disrupters.

Other challenges facilitators may face include dealing with limited resources—meeting preparation and execution is labor intensive and often stresses the budget of any planning project—and the trend in many places is toward declining rates of public involvement and attendance at public meetings. The growing use of online survey and engagement tools is one promising counterrtrend. The report discusses these challenges and their possible solutions.

**PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Facilitating meetings is challenging, enjoyable, and rewarding work, and urban planners usually get to do a lot of it. Planners should keep in mind five fundamental guidelines for successful facilitation:

1. A facilitator’s authority is given by the group.
2. Show respect to all, at all times.
3. Maintain neutrality to maintain trust.
5. Practice, practice, practice.

Facilitation is an important and valuable skill. Meeting facilitation skills lead to a general understanding, appreciation, and use of collaborative work processes, which are increasingly needed in today’s complex and diverse world. The planning profession can never have enough good facilitators.

This PAS Report provides much of the basic information on which to build a set of strong facilitation skills. Readers can use this information to further develop these skills in their professional practices—and then apply those skills in taking on the exciting and rewarding work of meeting facilitation in many different settings within the world of community and strategic planning.