



A NATIONAL PLAN TO REINVEST IN AMERICA

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Hosting Public Infrastructure Forums: A Primer for Stakeholders

The growing infrastructure crisis affects communities of all sizes in all parts of our nation. Sadly, much of the focus on the larger problem has been dissipated by conflicts over individual projects, obscuring the fact that we have no national plan – or funding – to meet our America’s infrastructure needs.

To focus attention on the infrastructure crisis, I have used my role as Member of Congress to act as a convener, engaging a wide range of decision-makers and stakeholders in a discussion about national needs and local priorities. These discussions have been fruitful and set the stage for Congressional action.

A public Infrastructure Forum can be simple or elaborate. Here are a few key elements that will help ensure its success.

Purpose

A successful public Infrastructure Forum elicits comments and opinion from a wide range of interested parties about their infrastructure priorities. The forum provides an opportunity to hear a wide range of differing opinions.

There are dozens of potential solutions for infrastructure investments; this is not the time to settle on any one of them. By focusing the Forum on the big picture, you can provide a unique opportunity for presenters and attendees alike to offer their thoughts in a non-confrontational setting. By raising important issues, listening to people’s concerns, and learning from a broad range of interests, you can provide all participants with a better understanding of how these national concerns affect your community.

The purpose of a public forum is to not embrace a particular policy or priority but to hear from forum participants. Taking sides at an early stage of any discussion reduces flexibility in the long term, increases the likelihood of friction or opposition later, and minimizes the opportunity to fashion more comprehensive and thoughtful solutions.

Format

Set the stage by welcoming participants and audience members, explain the nature of the challenge and the purpose of the forum, which is to hear from invited testimony as well as attendees.

Invite local elected leaders to participate at the head table. Their task is to listen to the invited testimony and attendee comments/questions and to reflect, at the end of the forum, on what they've heard. At the beginning of the forum, ask each of the head table guests to spend 3-5 minutes identifying their areas of concern and what they hope to gain from this discussion.

Create the core of the program around a series of panels organized on specific topics. Each panel should consist of 3-5 witnesses, who each have 5 minutes to share their ideas and recommendations. Each panelist should be a credible representative who has something specific to say on the identified topic. Allow 5-10 minutes at the end of each panel's presentation for head table guests to ask any clarification or edification questions.

At the conclusion of the panel presentations, provide an opportunity for members of the audience to be heard. Asking audience members to submit cards to forum staff with their names, contact information, and specific topic or question will help to keep the discussion focused and on track.

At the conclusion of the audience testimony, ask the head table guests to summarize what they've heard and what they feel is important. After the head table guests have presented their summaries, wrap up the event by thanking everyone for attending, and announcing any next steps or follow-up activities

Participants

Select panelists from leaders who have a reputable standing in the community and can articulate a point of view clearly and succinctly. Be sure to include a variety of viewpoints. Do not hesitate to invite those who present opposing points of view, if they are seen as credible. If well structured, a public forum is a wonderful non-confrontational opportunity to hear from all sides.

Panelists might represent:

- Stakeholders
- Special interest groups
- Community and environmental advocates
- Business and technical professionals

- Local experts in planning, design, engineering,
- Representatives from federal, state and local government or agencies
- Affected citizens and business leaders
- Engaged University and College Students
- Representatives of traditionally disenfranchised communities and neighborhoods
- Health professionals and educators

Seek to attract audience members from as wide a range as possible, so that community leaders and interested parties to have the chance to listen and learn from others. Some groups to consider:

- Community groups
- Business organizations
- Academics and educators
- Professionals in this area
- Special interest groups
- Media outlets

Press and Outreach

Invite reporters who cover infrastructure issues, as well as those on the environmental, global warming, tax, local government, and community beats. Members of your newspaper's editorial board can be valuable contributors or moderators.

Include web-based media: bloggers, environmental groups, local community and business advocates, etc.

Either before or after the public forum, set aside time for the media to interview the head table guests and panelists.

Provide press packets that include the forum's purpose, agenda, speaker contact information, relevant background material, your own contact information, etc.

Follow-Up

Immediately after the forum, send out thank you notes and a summary of the forum to all participants.

If possible, post a summary of the forum online. Email a copy of the summary to all those who participated in or attended the forum and provide an opportunity to offer later reflections on the proceedings.