

**Making Public Participation More Effective:  
Lessons from BC's Resource Management Processes**

by

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## **“Making Public Participation More Effective: Lessons from BC’s Resource Management Processes”**

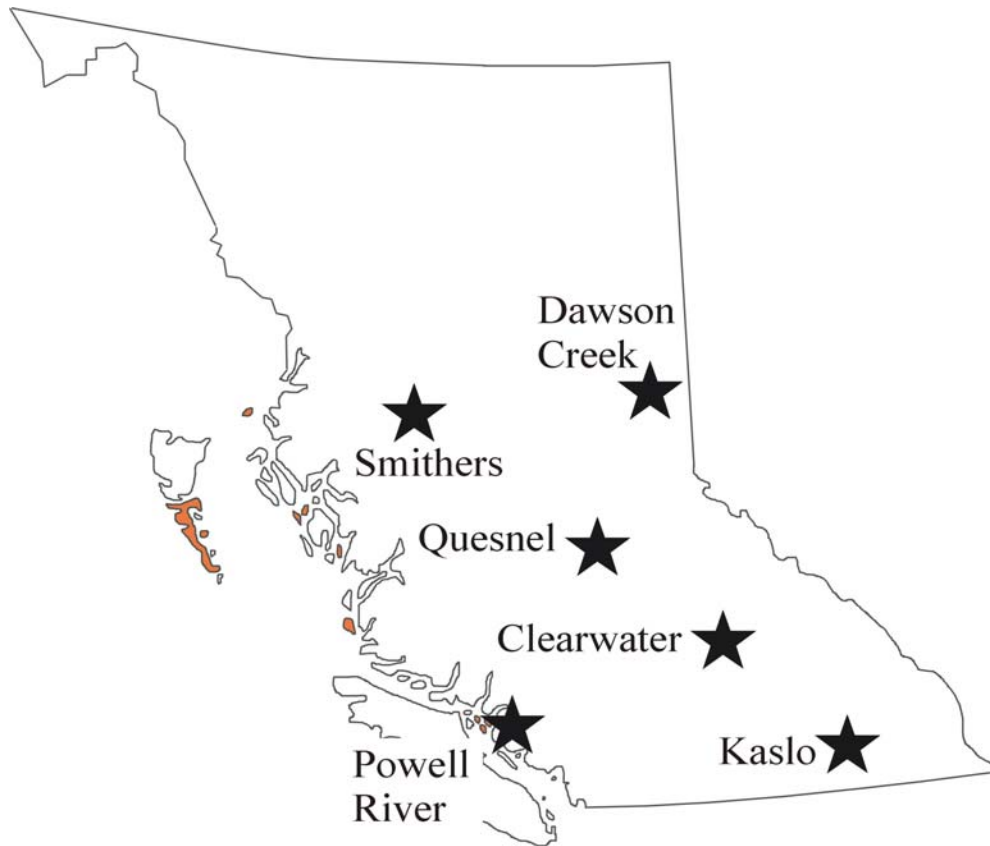
### **INTRODUCTION**

British Columbia is presently in the midst of an extensive set of public participation processes concerned with natural resources planning and decision-making. Over the past decade, there has been a tremendous increase in the number and range of consultation processes - with many of these having been driven by the restructuring of the forest industry and the subsequent impacts of this upon many small forestry-dependent communities. While some processes have been visible in the media, and a few very controversial, all are proving to be tremendously important within the regions where they are underway.

Public consultation is not a new phenomena. There have been legislated requirements to hold public hearings or public information meetings on a wide variety of land-use planning issues for many years. As well, many planning and management professionals and jurisdictions have gone above and beyond basic legislative requirements to develop broad mechanisms for consulting with the public on a continuing basis. As such, planners, consultation process managers, and members of the public, have developed considerable experience with what works and does not work in public consultation.

The findings summarized below draw upon research into the public consultation experiences of six British Columbia communities. The communities of Quesnel, Smithers, Kaslo, Dawson Creek, Powell River, and Clearwater range in both size and dependence on resource based industries (Figure 1). They also range in their experiences with land-use planning and decision-making processes. To collect these experiences we used interview, focus group,

**Figure 1 Case Study Communities**



Community Name	1996 Pop.	Forest Region	Main Economic Base	Resource Planning Process
Smithers	5,624	Skeena-Bulkley	Forestry-Agr.-Tourism	LRMP-Comm.Res. Bd.
Quesnel	8,468	Cariboo-Chilcotin	Forestry	CORE
Dawson Ck.	11,125	Omineca-Peace	Agriculture-Forestry	LRMP
Clearwater	4,960	Thompson-Okanagan	Forestry-Tourism	LRMP
Powell Riv.	13,130	Pacific	Forestry	Watershed Mgmt.
Kaslo	1,063	Kootenay-Boundary	Forestry-Tourism	CORE-Comm.Forest

questionnaire, and open house methodologies. Based on this research, this paper reports on a set of generic principles which are important for guiding effective public consultation processes.

## **PRINCIPLES**

Our work does not seek to “re-invent the public consultation wheel”. There already exists a wide range of sources (reports, books, video series, and Internet sites) through which planners, resource managers, and members of the public may turn for detailed information on how to conduct public hearings, visioning sessions, dispute resolution, and the like. For example, a set of annotated bibliographies developed during the course of our research is available and contains hundreds of useful references on these topics<sup>1</sup>. Rather, this paper presents a set of core principles to which planners and participants can look for guidance over the course of public consultation exercises (see Figure 2 at end of paper for summary).

We felt strongly from the start that those with experience in public participation and consultation processes were the best people to evaluate what works and what does not work. The principles described below derive directly from their experiences and involvement. Through focus groups, questionnaire surveys, and community open-house meetings, people shared with us their experiences and views on public consultation. It is from these lessons that public participation processes can be improved upon and can hopefully in the future avoid some of the pitfalls encountered in the past.

### **Importance of Consultation**

The people in our study were clear about the continuing importance of public consultation in natural resources management and planning processes. While some felt that improvements were needed, others were pleased simply for the opportunity to have input into issues so very important for their community. With the move towards increased public involvement, two trends are clear. The first is that the public wants this to continue and to expand. There is little question that the public now considers government consultation on range of planning issues obligatory.

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of the various reports and publications which were generated through this research is available at the following website: [http://web.unbc.ca/geography/faculty/greg/print\\_research.shtml](http://web.unbc.ca/geography/faculty/greg/print_research.shtml)

Second, given the momentum of past involvement, it will be very difficult to limit public participation in future land-use planning and decision-making processes.

Within these general trends, a number of recurring points concerned with the quality of consultation were raised. Many people made impassioned arguments that consultation must be 'meaningful'. They argued that it must occur early enough in processes to allow input that might shape the process and resultant plans. It must also occur throughout the process to maintain public contact and involvement. Many argued that one of the best ways to demonstrate that a consultation process has been genuine is that the public input must be clearly evident within the final plans.

### **Clarity of Process**

One of the most frustrating aspects of public consultation for those we spoke with concerns the clarity (and their understanding) of the process itself. People were often not very clear about a number of key issues including their roles in the process, the overall task or mandate of the process, and the delegation of decision-making power. A critical area of concern centres upon "who will participate". Many resource planning processes in British Columbia involve "sector representatives" meeting at a roundtable. Questions were raised about who identified these "constituency groups", what was the relationship between the table representative and the constituency they were supposed to represent, and how these individuals were appointed/nominated/or volunteered to these positions. In a democratic society these are critical questions, ones which can cut to the heart of process legitimacy.

There were also concerns raised about the coordination of different planning processes. This is a general concern for any "multi-level" planning environment - many people were unclear about how "this process" fit within "that process". A further area of concern involved the matter of reaching "agreement". The issue of compromise versus consensus was raised many times as was the dilemma created by multiple interpretations of these terms around the same negotiating tables. Finally, questions about who will make the "final" decisions, and where appeal routes exist, are proving very frustrating to participants. After working hard on a land-use or resource plan, a participant often feels betrayed when another decision-making level changes substantive

recommendations. Support for both the process and the recommendations can be severely undermined when participants become disillusioned.

## **Involving the "Public"**

One of the most challenging tasks in public consultation is actually engaging with the general public. Planners and process managers know very well the difficulty of both contacting and motivating a wide cross-section of the public to become involved. There are questions about how to motivate people to come to meetings, about how to equip those people so they can participate effectively, and how to maintain interest and participation over the sometimes long time periods over which planning processes function. There was wide recognition that only a knowledgeable public can effectively participate. Background information and awareness of the process will affect the quality of public input and the breadth of participation. On-going public capacity building must, therefore, be integral in any planning and decision-making process. If the public feel they have a valued role, and they can see tangible outcomes from local involvement, they will be willing to contribute over the long term.

Publicity was identified as having an important role in increasing awareness of the particular planning issue and its relevance to people within a local area. It was pointed out that there already exist a wide range of media forums which can be more effectively used, and that early publicity and awareness forms the foundation for an on-going information campaign throughout the planning process. More generally, the people we spoke with raised the question of "valuing" public input. This critical issue seems certainly to have influenced the feelings of many participants. As well, there was a great deal of concern about just who the "public" was in some of these consultation processes. A commonly raised observation was that special interest groups do not necessarily represent the breadth of views within the general public.

Two practical problems for both communities and planning process managers concern 1) representation across major divisions in the local community, and 2) community boundaries. First, if a community is highly divided and unable to come to some general agreement on "what they want", then some other process (such as community visioning) is needed as a preliminary stage instead of trying to move directly into a planning process. Second, the area over which a

community feels it has collective or common responsibility may or may not coincide with government jurisdictional boundaries. The question of geographic “fit” or “sphere of interest” is very important in questions of public involvement and the practical matter of who should have input.

### **Information Throughout the Process**

The research identified a great need for access to relevant and understandable information on a timely basis. Information must be available at the start of the process in order to create a level playing field among participants. It must also be available throughout the process in order to keep participants as up-to-date on deliberations as possible. The concern was also clearly expressed that the type of information accepted into the process not be limited or restricted. Process managers must include and recognize the value of different types of knowledge, including folk and indigenous knowledge of local areas and lands.

There is a related concern about information availability to the general public. Again, timely, relevant, and readable information is what people are asking for. They have little use for legal notices couched in jargon and legal boundary definitions. They also have little use for publication of highly technical reviews or reports which even the educated public is not likely to understand.

Information flow can create a sense of openness and confidence in the planning process. There were many who called for more and varied ways by which to increase information flow to the public. Current methods such as newspaper reports and advertising supplements or direct mailouts were considered suitable to some processes, but more use was suggested for public meetings, focus group discussions, usable public opinion surveys, and presentations to local clubs. ‘Continuing’ information exchange media suggestions included setting up web sites or toll free telephone numbers. Many ways of soliciting information and providing feedback are now available and should be experimented with to see what is appropriate or will work in the local context. Finally, many suggested the need to consider a “professional facilitator” to assist local consultation. In particularly difficult situations, or with respect to locally controversial topics, this provision of “distance” between local managers/planners and public participants may be very



helpful to all involved.

## **Process Management**

A great deal of frustration was expressed with respect to the functioning and management of some planning and decision-making processes. Those in charge of administering such processes often struggle against very restrictive legislative requirements, limited staff resources, and limited budgets. Those coming to participate in the process want more certainty about what is to happen, the time line involved, etc.. While there were contradictory opinions expressed on topics such as openness and time lines (after all, we talked with people in six communities where a range of public participation processes have been underway) all wanted more clarity on these matters.

The concept of “Openness” was considered crucial to success. Three aspects of openness were identified. Initially, openness refers to the broadness of vision and the ‘mind set’ of participants involved, together with the recognized need to work cooperatively towards shared solutions. Openness during the process was considered critical to legitimacy and important for bringing people into the process. Finally, carrying this sense of openness to the end of the process, it is important for participants to see what has happened with their input and recommendations after the process is completed.

A good deal of the frustration experienced by all parties could be mitigated by setting forth at the outset an outline of expectations connected with the mechanical organization of the process. Even where there is uncertainty about one or more ‘mechanical’ issues (such as an exact time line to be followed, for example), as long as all parties have the same understanding of expectations going into the process they can deal with changes to those expectations as the process evolves. It is when parties have quite different expectations that conflicts most often arise.

## **Cautions**

Despite considerable hard work, and often the best of intentions, public participation processes are replete with pitfalls which can undermine the legitimacy of the process, the confidence and enthusiasm of those involved, and the support of the general public. Real or imaged problems can actually derail public participation processes.

A number of the pitfalls and cautions identified in the research will not be of surprise to those with experience in planning debates but they should not be ignored because the consequences can be damaging. In general, the role of experts and managers must be clear and valued, as must be the role of public participation and public input. Openness at all stages of the process can avoid the pitfall of “hidden decision-making power”. There is also concern about the quality of public input as only a portion of the community is generally interested in participating in planning. As well, the need for transition/implementation plans after the consultation is complete must not be forgotten because how this is done may be critical to the lasting impression of the value of the consultation exercise itself. Many people commented that after all the hard work they thought they had developed a sound plan but that its implementation (either slowly, incompletely, or incorrectly) undermined all that the group had worked for.

Common responses from those we spoke with suggested an underlying lack of trust in the process. Statements such as “local opinion still has little influence”, “community input is just tokenism”, “what is the use, no one pays any attention to what we say”, “its just an old boy network”, and “the vested interests seem always to win what they want” present a clear challenge to planners to develop the trust of their public constituency.

Following from these comments, when people were asked what would be the “most needed ingredient” in a successful public consultation process, the responses focussed upon cooperation, trust, and common sense. It was also strongly noted that none of these can occur without first having mutual trust and respect. Others built upon the earlier noted concept of openness, by suggested the most needed ingredient in public consultation is information and a clear understanding of all the benefits and costs of different planning options. Building upon this point, some suggested that public participation could be maintained if it is made clear from the

start that these are slow processes that will take time and effort.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Public consultation is not a new phenomena for Canadian planning professionals. By drawing heavily upon the experiences of people in natural resource and land use planning processes, we have identified a set of principles to which managers and participants alike can look for guidance over the course of developing public consultation exercises. These principles included: the importance of consultation, the need for clarity of process, the need to involve the “public”, the requirement to manage information flow throughout the process, and the need for careful process management. As well, people identified some generic “cautions” for which those involved with public consultation processes may wish to watch.

If care and attention are given to the points raised in this report, public consultation may be a positive experience. This is important because there are many benefits to successful consultation processes beyond simply “the plan”. When such are positive experiences, they can achieve many outcomes including new community ‘visions’, a renewed sense of confidence in the local economy, environment, leaders, and institutions, and the reaffirmation which comes from building on local success. It is our hope that these principles will be of very practical use.

**Figure 2**  
**Principles for Guiding Public Consultation Processes**

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**IMPORTANCE OF CONSULTATION**

**Consultation is Important**

There is a strong feeling that there are positive benefits from public involvement and consultation.

**Obligation to Consult**

The public is coming to expect opportunities for significant input into planning processes.

**CLARITY OF PROCESS**

**Level Playing Field**

The involvement of a wide range of participants prompts concern for equity in terms of ability to participate and influence the process.

**Clarity of Mandate**

The scope and terms of reference must be clear to all participants.

**Clarity of Decision Making Powers**

Public involvement often merges with an increased desire for public decision-making power.

**Coordinate Resources Planning Processes**

Need to be clear on how a particular planning process fits within larger Provincial processes.

**INVOLVING THE "PUBLIC"**

**Publicity**

Need to increase awareness of the issue and its relevance to people within a local area.

**Value Public Input**

If people expend time to participate, they need to know in very clear ways that their time and input was appreciated, valued, and relevant to the process outcome.

**Recognize Public Involvement Problems**

There are real problems involving members of the general public which need to be recognized if they are going to be resolved.

**Understanding the Interest Groups are not the "Public"**

Sector or interest group based consultation models must recognize the limited constituencies of these groups.

**General Public Capacity Building**

There was wide recognition that only a knowledgeable public can effectively participate.

**INFORMATION THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS**

**Access to Base Information**

There is a critical need that all groups and participants start with the same basic information base.

**Information Sharing as Process Proceeds**

It is important to keep information flow open as the process proceeds.

**Broaden Consultation Options**

There is a call for more and varied ways by which to increase information flow.

**PROCESS MANAGEMENT**

**Open Process**

A need for both a welcoming atmosphere and transparency of process.

**Timelines**

There is a need for a clear timeline and markers/milestones of progress.

**CAUTIONS**

**Most Needed Ingredient**

Cooperation and common sense are the most needed ingredient in all successful group activities.

**Perceived Dangers**

Real or imaged problems can derail public participation processes.

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