Public Participation Best Practices: An Assessment of the Texas Department of Housing and

Community Affairs

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to establish a practical ideal type public participation model and gauge public participation policies at the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA). TDHCA is a good case study because the department is responsible for funding most affordable housing developments in the state. As the state's lead agency tasked with funding rehabilitation and construction of new affordable housing, it is imperative that department administrators collaborate with stakeholders, legislators, and neighborhood residents. An effective public participation policy must be in place to ensure underrepresented and vulnerable Texans have the opportunity to participate in policy formation. The available literature was reviewed to develop best practice methods and the best practice policy was compared with participation policies at TDHCA.

Focused interviews with TDHCA staff were conducted to gather data about specific public participation policies at the department. The interview results, when compared to the ideal model, identified several areas where TDHCA policy could be improved. TDHCA is not taking advantage of new media resources to connect with citizens. Additionally, TDHCA should focus on staff development to improve written and oral communication with the public.

About the Author

Valentin DeLeon has worked for the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs as a multifamily housing specialist for three years. Valentin received his Bachelors Degree in Political Science from Texas State University in 2007. Valentin plans to continue working at the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs, and hopes to apply what he has learned in the MPA program at the department. Valentin is married and has one daughter.

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<center>**Introduction**</center>

The Importance of Citizen Participation

Fundamental principles of democracy include the idea that people should control the government and every citizen has the right to participate. Citizens make their voice heard by voting in elections, which is the most recognizable form of citizen participation. Although voting is considered public participation, simply casting a vote is the most passive way citizens participate. The voting process may sound democratic, but when examined more closely, voting defers choices to representatives in city councils, state government, and federal legislations. Furthermore, before citizens exercise their power of choosing candidates to represent them, they must first research policy issues and use that information to make a choice. Voting may be the easiest and least time consuming way for any one person to participate in a democracy, however, citizen input should go beyond casting a vote, and citizens should express their opinions on how government should work.

If casting a vote is the easiest way for any citizen to participate in democracy, one might assume that voter turnout is near one-hundred percent. This assumption could not be further from the truth. By 1996 voter turnout had declined in every presidential election for forty years (Patterson 2002, 3), and in the last two presidential elections only 56% of voting age citizens actually voted. This trend in voter turnout is worrisome because it shows that Americans are losing interest or confidence in the government. Studies in the 1950s found that Americans lacked political sophistication and ideological understanding of the electorate (Dalton 2006, 17).

Simply put, as early as the 1950s, Americans were taking their precious democracy for granted and choosing not to participate in the democratic process.

If Americans can no longer be counted on to cast a vote for someone else to make decisions for them, then it is safe to assume American citizens will be even less likely to physically show up to a community meeting about zoning laws, or participate in a focus group regarding smart growth strategies for the city they live in. However, public participation is important because private citizens know firsthand, which public policies work and which need improvement. Elected officials and public administrators need feedback from citizens on how to best improve policy.

Direct Democracy

Frank Bryan writes in detail about New England Town Meetings, and how Alexis de Tocqueville, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson all considered New England Town Meetings "real democracy" (Bryan 2004, 26). The Town Meeting takes place once a year and is the designated place for town laws and ordinances to be considered. In New England town meetings, all citizens vote and pass laws that affect all citizens (Bryan 2004, 3).

In this system of direct democracy, the citizens are responsible for the laws that will directly impact their lives. Bryan compares Athens, Vermont with the ancient city of Athens, Greece, and points out similarities in their democratic systems. Bryan notes that Athens, Greece may have been the center of democracy, but the Athenian empire consisted of several tiny towns or "demes" that all practiced the same direct democracy that could be found in New England towns (Bryan 2004, 9).

Bryan acknowledges that the Town Meetings are not perfect. In the first place, Town Meetings still only occur in small *townships*. Boston, for example is in New England, but the city no longer adheres to the Town Meeting format of Athens, Vermont. Town Meetings may have the appearance of direct democracy, but even such an admirable attempt at true democracy falls short. Rural towns with populations less than 2,000 have difficulty getting one-hundred percent participation. The problem, as explained by Bryan is that the lives of citizens no longer allow for all day participation at a town meeting. One observer noted at a Town Meeting in Strafford, Vermont that most of the citizens were absent from the Town Meeting and went to work instead.

While the ideal of the town meeting is not realistic in many communities, it is one of the most important examples of American "real democracy" where every citizen makes his or her voice heard. The reasons for decline in public participation may vary, but the policies to encourage and accommodate participation should be constant. Broadened participation is important because it "provides an expanded set of ideas, rewards, and incentives for regulators" (Cramton 1972, 528). This expanded set of ideas results in better public policy because citizen preferences are reflected in the outcome. Robert Reich succinctly states that "public deliberation helps transform individual valuations into social values; it helps forge collective purposes, and, even more important, helps define and refine public morality" (Reich 1985, 1632). Through these deliberations, individuals become citizens (Reich 1985).

Barriers to Public Participation

Elected officials depend on public administrators to draft, and execute legislation. In the past, administrators worked independently on policy issues, but more recently citizens have become more involved in the process. Today "public managers must know how to work with all

kinds of publics," including individual citizens, small community groups, and large national public interest groups (Thomas 1995, 1).

Mistrust of Government

President Woodrow Wilson's famous essay on the need for public administration warned against involving the public in the "daily details" and called public participation a "clumsy nuisance" (Wilson 1941, 499). The *politics-administration dichotomy* developed by Frank Goodnow states that public participation is acceptable in politics but not in the administration of public policy. Citizen participation in the politics-administration dichotomy is limited to voting in elections and alignment with political parties. However, public administration and policy formation is left to professional bureaucrats in the politics-administration dichotomy (Thomas 1995). Administrators continued to work in isolation from the public until the "Great Society" legislation of the Johnson administration mandated that administrators seek "maximum feasible participation" from the public (Thomas 1995, 19).

One obstacle to increased public participation is a general mistrust of the government, and public agencies (Beierle and Cayford 2002). Mistrust of government and public agencies may have several root causes, including exclusion of the public from policy decisions. The reasons for mistrust are of little concern at this point, but regaining the public trust is a crucial step in both improving public participation, and forming better policies. Public trust as defined by Wang and Wan Wart is the general concept that the public trust an agency (or government) to "do the right thing" (Wang and Wan Wart 2007, 266).

An effective public participation policy could potentially increase citizen trust of public agencies by improving communication, and improving the process of participation.

Time and Availability

Another barrier to increased public participation is lack of time, and availability of citizens to participate. As in the example of the New England Town meeting, most citizens do not have the time to attend public meetings that could potentially last all day. When surveyed, most citizens expressed a desire to participate in their communities, but "the demands of day to day life get in the way" (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998, 322).

In addition to the lack of free time available to participate in the administrative process, many citizens do not participate because the potential gain of participation is not worth the cost of time and effort to participate (Cramton 1972).

Lack of Communication and Ineffective Techniques

Public participation can be stifled when the communication between administrators and citizens breaks down. Citizens often claim that communication in participation processes flows one way, from the administrative professional to the citizen (King et al. 322). Administrative processes should be both easily understood and easily accessible for citizens. The process by which public administrators solicit public participation should be explained clearly, and the rules for participation should be accessible before the participation process begins.

Similarly, the mechanism by which information is solicited should allow for two-way communication between citizens and administrators. It is important that the public participation process provide feedback to those who have taken the time to participate, in order to assure participants their opinions have been considered.

Defining Effective Participation Mechanisms

Rowe and Frewer propose that there are over 100 supposed public participation "mechanisms" (defined as processes/techniques/instruments) (Rowe and Frewer 2005). The mechanisms vary depending on the context, circumstances, participants, and the aim of the information being sought. Rowe and Frewer's list of mechanisms includes similar, redundant, and overlapping practices. There is little agreement on what constitutes an effective public participation process, which leads to confusion. This lack of focus gives the impression of insincerity or impropriety of public administrators from the perspective of many citizens.

Despite the importance of citizen participation there is no consensus on the best way to support citizen involvement. The overwhelming number of similar and overlapping participation mechanisms makes it difficult to measure their strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness (Rowe & Frewer 2000, 2005; Beierle & Cayford 1998). This research does not champion any mechanism of public participation over another. Instead, the process of public participation has been simplified into basic characteristics all public participation mechanisms can benefit from.

Facilitate Citizen Involvement by Enhancing Accessibility

While public administrators cannot change the abilities of citizens to participate, they can put in place practices and programs that enhance the citizen's ability to successfully participate. The next chapter reviews specific methods found to promote effective citizen participation and proposes a practical ideal type citizen participation model to enhance public participation. The

literature review identifies three measurable characteristics of effective public participation policies. The practical ideal public participation policy will;

1. Use new media to promote two-way communication with the public

2. Provide convenient forums to increase accessibility for those who wish to participate

3. Demystify complicated policy jargon for consumption by laypersons

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to identify the characteristics of a practical ideal type public participation policy for use by state agencies. The model developed will then be gauged against the public participation policies and practices at the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA). Focused interviews with TDHCA staff will be used to gather data and the results of those interviews will be analyzed to determine how closely TDHCA comes to the ideal model.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter Two reviews the available literature on public participation policies and practices. The literature was analyzed and a conceptual framework developed to identify the key characteristics of a best practices public participation policy. The conceptual framework consists of measurable characteristics of the ideal public participation policy.

Chapter Three is the methodology chapter in which the conceptual framework is operationalized. Chapter three briefly discusses the practical ideal conceptual framework and how the policies at TDHCA will be gauged against the ideal model. The design of the interview questions is briefly discussed along with the qualifications of the interviewees.

The results of the interviews are recorded and analyzed for further discussion in Chapter Four. The results chapter will identify how closely TDHCA polices come to the ideal model created in chapter two.

The final chapter will draw conclusions from the literature reviewed, and the data gathered. Chapter five will also identify policy suggestions for TDHCA, and propose ideas for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to establish a practical ideal type public participation model and gauge public participation policies at TDHCA. This chapter reviews literature relevant to public participation methods, models, and goals in order to develop a best practices model for public administrators. This literature is organized into a practical ideal type model (Shields 2005). The ideal model will be used to gauge participation policies at TDHCA

The literature emphasizes that public participation methods should be "accessible" to those who wish to participate (Rowe and Frewer 2000; Halvorsen 2001; Macintosh 2004). Rowe and Frewer propose several criterions to ensure accessible public participation processes. The public participation criteria include access to information, time and material, and human resources (Rowe and Frewer 2000, 15). Information, as described by Rowe and Frewer are the "pertinent facts" that citizens should know prior to participation. Citizens should have access to how public participation will be conducted, the goals of public participation, and any background information available to prepare citizens for the public participation process.

Public participation processes should also be considerate of citizen time. The everyday lives of citizens are one of the most commonly cited reasons for lack of participation (King et al, 1998). Therefore, the ideal public participation policy will respect the limited time citizens have to participate. The ideal public participation policy will also provide citizens with access to

human resources. Human resources include staff contacts willing to guide non-professional citizens through potentially complex policy issues (Rowe and Frewer 2000, 15).

Governments can promote accessibility by:

- Using New Media (information)

- Providing Convenient Forums (time resources)

- Demystifying Policy Jargon (material & human resources)

These three elements of accessibility can be broken down further into measurable characteristics that will be the focus of later data analysis. The remainder of this chapter will explore these characteristics of public participation.

The State of Texas Government Code requires only that agency rules, including public participation processes, be available to the public and published to the agency website (Texas Government Code 2001.007). This research will show how these basic requirements can be improved.

New Media Policies

The practical ideal type public participation policy will use new media policies to increase accessibility and improve communication with the public. New media policies include interactive web content and mobile communications as tools to increase accessibility for citizens, and improve communication. Government agencies should use "a range of technologies to cater for the diverse technical and communicative skills of citizens (Macintosh 2004, 3).

Technology must play a role in the public participation process and policy. Within the last ten years, the internet has evolved from a static source of information into a mobile resource accessed from cell phones, tablets, and other mobile devices. Public administrators should

embrace new media as a means to increase awareness of programs and policies, while decreasing staff time dedicated to citizen education.

Previous research identified user motivations to browse online content on mobile devices. The motivations included awareness, time management, curiosity, diversion, social connection, and social avoidance (Carol Taylor et al. 2008). Several of these "motivations" coincide with reasons public administrators should use new media to communicate with the public. Mobile two-way communication will allow administrators to;

1. Distribute information regarding opportunities to participate (awareness)

2. Allow citizens to access public participation forums at convenient times and locations (time management)

3. Satisfy real-time information requests by citizens (curiosity)

Public agencies that embrace two-way mobile communication policies will subsequently improve participation accessibility.

It should be noted that new media policies are not the same as E-Government. E-Government has generally been defined as government agencies using all technology available for purposes of transparency (Moon 2002, 425). E-Government includes agency websites, online payments, and other functions specific to agency mission. The new media policies conceptualized in this research are specific to public participation.

The specific characteristics of new media relevant to this research are *interactive communication tools*, and *mobile communication tools*. Governments should use interactive web content and mobile communications to promote citizen participation. Interactive communication tools promote two-way communication between public administrators and citizens. Two-way communication should increase citizen trust that Governments will "do the right thing" (Wang

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and Wan Wart 2007, 266). Mobile communication tools make participation more convenient and lower the social cost of participation.

Interactive Web Content

New media tools should include a means for two-way information exchange via interactive web content. Interactive web content includes *online surveys*, *forums*, and *e-meetings* (Kaylor et al. 2001). These interactive tools can be part of E-Government initiatives, because agency websites are still the primary online locations for citizens to find information about public participation opportunities. Social media tools can also be used to distribute information, and to receive input on the information provided to citizens.

The practical ideal public participation policy will seek citizen participation by utilizing "online surveys/polls, conversation forums, and scheduled e-meetings" (Kaylor et al. 2001, 301). These web tools increase accessibility for citizens because they allow for remote participation, and are convenient.

Seoul, Korea is an excellent example of how a city can use interactive web content to facilitate public participation (Holzer and Kim 2005, 92). The Cyber Policy Forum in Seoul aims to "provide citizens with opportunities to understand policy issues and to facilitate discussions; to encourage citizen participation in public administration and to obtain feedback about policy issues; and to reflect citizens' opinions in city policies and produce more tailored policy solutions for citizens" (Holzer and Kim 2005, 87).

Online Surveys

The practical ideal public participation policy will use online surveys because they provide administrators access to a wider range of citizen opinions. The administrative costs of conducting online surveys is low, and more importantly administrators can easily follow up with participants (Evans and Mathur 2005)

Online Forums

Online Forums should be used to allow citizens to work though ideas with each other prior to meetings, which will enable citizens to participate more effectively and confidently. Online forums also allow public administrators to facilitate discussions with a larger audience, over larger distances and are not bound by meeting room size, or meetings lasting several hours.

E-Meetings

E-meetings improve public participation because they allow citizens to participate even if they are physically unable to attend a forum. One of the barriers to increased participation identified in chapter one was inconvenient meeting times. Interactive web content like e-meetings can directly address the problem of convenience by making participation forums more accessible.

Many governments have successfully used interactive web content. Scottsdale Arizona has been one of the more successful cities to engage its citizens (Kaylor et al. 2001, 301). Scottsdale's webpage contains a "Set Up Scottsdale" link that connects to several online dialogues including "a conversation forum to facilitate discussion threads about a wide range of issues pertaining to e-government and Scottsdale's Future" (Kaylor et al. 2001, 301). The

Scottsdale example is worth noting because the city's website is a portal for citizens to provide feedback and express their opinions on city policy. The portal can be accessed from anywhere at any time, essentially making administrators in Scottsdale accessible at all times.

Participation policies need "new approaches that emphasize two-way interaction between decision makers and the public as well as deliberation among participants" (Abelson et al. 2003, 240). Abelson acknowledges that the number of interested stakeholders has increased as the size of cities and towns have increased (Abelson et al. 2003). New media tools will enable administrators to accommodate a larger number of participants that may not have bothered to physically attend a public hearing, but were willing to submit an online survey, or post a comment on a Facebook page or blog (Abelson et al. 2003)

New media like Facebook, Twitter, and blogging are resources government agencies should take advantage of to reach their target demographic at low cost and in a way that is familiar to many users. These social media tools are most effective if they are used to educate citizens about online survey opportunities, online forums, or upcoming e-meetings.

As of September 1, 2011 Facebook had 154.6 million users in the United States alone (Insidefacebook.com). Social media like Facebook and Twitter have changed the way citizens access the internet, and social media users are now able to access their Facebook and Twitter accounts on their mobile phones. The cultural penetration of social media sites is significant enough that public agencies should utilize the services to connect with citizens.

Mobile Communications

The practical ideal type new media policy uses mobile communication to connect with stakeholders, because mobile phones have become the new wave of connectivity (Ito and

Daisuke, 2005). The term "mobile accessibility" refers to the information made available via wireless devices, i.e. mobile phones, tablets, and netbooks. The number of mobile users is increasing, and has already surpassed the number of households with internet access (Roggenkamp 2004). Mobile accessibility is important because there is still a digital divide in the United States, and mobile interconnectivity is bridging this gap.

According to a 2009 study by the Pew Institute, 83% of American adults have mobile phones or smart phones (Rainie 2010, 5). Mobile communication tools should be used by public agencies because they are convenient, can be personalized, and reach a wider base audience (Kushchu and Kuscu 2010). Kushchu and Kuscu argue that mobile devices are "always on" and allow citizens to access government anytime or anywhere. Additionally, mobile devices, unlike personal computers which are shared, are personalized by and more familiar to users.

Text Messaging

Song and Cornford studied the effects of mobile accessibility in Beijing. Their research identified how the low penetration rate of internet users (27.6%) compared to the penetration rate of mobile phone users (90.6%) sparked a government plan to use text messaging to provide citizens with information about various topics of concern (Song and Cornford 2006).

Beijing local bureaucracies vary significantly from American systems. In China, information from residents must pass through several levels of bureaucracy before it can be processed and eventually addressed or resolved (Song and Cornford 2006, 4). The pilot program described by the authors divided the city into a grid, and assigned a team of "supervisors" to each portion of the grid. Public complaints regarding infrastructure were called into the supervisors who would then follow up with the complaint, taking pictures with their phones to document.

The program was a success and residents were happy to see complaints addressed quickly. Local government should embrace new technology, its impact on organizations, and the opportunities it offers (Song and Cornford 2006, 11).

Text messaging is one way that mobile communications can be used to communicate with a more diverse group of citizens. Sending and receiving text messages has increasingly become more accessible and familiar to younger generations and less affluent demographics.

Mobile Applications

In 2008 the percent of Americans using mobile phones was 86.79% according to the Census Bureau. Kushchu and Kuscu elaborate on the importance of mobile communications and write that "mobile phones are no longer used only for voice communication but are a convenient way of connecting to the Internet and are used for transferring data, exchanging e-mails, and doing small scale business transactions" (Kushchu and Kuscu 2003, 3).They go on to state that mobile accessibility allows the government to receive feedback directly from the public and that wireless technology could allow for virtual referendums (Kushchu and Kuscu 2003, 11).

Mobile services free the citizen by providing access "that can be delivered from any place, at any time" (Rossel 2006, 80). Mobile phones surpassed the number of fixed line phones in the thirty-four Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries (Rossel 2006). Rossel emphasized how mobile communications will increase access for citizens and serve as an additional resource for distribution of important information.

Administrators should utilize new media tools like Facebook and Twitter in order to increase awareness and subsequently participation. New media tools should be used to distribute

information via the internet and mobile devices. Contacting stakeholders via mobile devices increases access and opportunities for interactions with citizens.

Convenient Forums

The practical ideal type public participation model should be convenient. Similarly to how new media will make participation and information accessible, administrators should also ensure that the participation methods used are convenient. Agencies can make the participation process convenient by facilitating brief, focused, and frequent forums so that citizen time is never wasted.

Brief Forums

Everyday lives and responsibilities limit the amount of time people have to participate in administrative processes. However, ineffective administrative processes are just as much to blame for low participation rates as everyday lives and responsibilities (King et al. 1998, 322). King, Feltey, and Susel showed that rigid processes by administrative agencies make it more difficult for citizens to participate in the process.

Educating citizens and administrators is paramount to improving public participation processes, but participation processes should also be flexible enough to meet the needs of all parties involved (King et al. 1998, 322). Administrators should use flexible meeting schedules with multiple opportunities to participate in order to increase convenience for potential participants (King et al. 1998, 324).

A survey of attendees at public hearing forums to determine what characteristics constituted a successful forum found that "laws requiring public hearings are usually only minimum standards, and additional input methods can be used to great advantage" (Baker et al. 2005, 493). A potential problem with public participation is that "hearings are sometimes held at difficult times and locations and too late in the decision-making process (Baker et al. 2005, 491). The length of the public hearing was not deemed statistically significant when determining overall satisfaction of public hearings, but the tempo of the meeting was. The survey indicated that "61 percent of the most-successful hearings employed a time limit on audience input, and that time management was an important factor" (Baker et al. 2005, 494).

Relevant Information

The practical ideal public participation policy will provide citizens with relevant information prior to participation forums. The literature on public participation supports that administrators should be considerate of stakeholder time (King et al. 1998; Baker et al. 2005). Using new media policies, previously discussed is one way to make participation brief, by providing pertinent information prior to public forums, thereby increasing the likelihood of a more informed pool of participants.

Focused Forums

The practical ideal type public participation model will have focused forums. In the previous section it was determined that the ideal public participation policy will have brief

forums in order to respect the limited time of citizens. Brief forums can only be achieved if administrators and participants are both prepared (Halvorsen 2006, 154).

A survey of city administrators about public hearings identified that time management was among the most "frequent problems exhibited by hearing facilitators" (Baker et al. 2005, 497). Those surveyed noted several shortcomings of the public meeting forums including:

- "Weak chair's failure to move agenda along"

- "Too much repetition of statements by audience"

- "Unlimited public input"

- "Lack of fair way to control speaking time" (Baker et al. 2005, 497)

Meeting Preparation

Administrators can ensure meetings are focused by being prepared for meetings with the public. Preparation for public meetings includes clearly stating the goals of meetings beforehand, and choosing a facilitator to keep the meeting on topic and moving (Baker et al. 2005 498). The nature and the scope of the participation task should also be clearly defined so as to limit ambiguity (Rowe and Frewer 2000, 16).

The Essential Manager's Manual states that circulating an agenda prior to meetings is an important step to prepare for a meeting (Heller 2008, 438). Providing an agenda prior to meetings, possibly via new media, ensures administrators fully understand what is going to be discussed, and gives participants the opportunity to research any relevant policy prior to participating.

Forums should be Frequent

The practical ideal public participation model includes frequent forums to increase accessibility. Citizens should be asked to participate throughout the decision making process (Baker et al. 2005). Citizens should also be involved as early as possible, and as soon as value judgments become salient (Rowe and Frewer 2000, 14).

Miami River Example

Meetings and forums with the public should be held to follow-up with previous participation efforts (Baker et al. 2005, 498). Administrators in Miami, Florida held monthly public meetings so that stakeholders were continually informed about various aspects of a Miami River dredging project (Holmes 2005, 90). In this example, the citizens of Miami were directly participating in policy formation regarding an issue that affected them, and the city administered multiple forums in which interested stakeholders were given opportunities to provide feedback. Frequent forums are also beneficial for participants to see if administrators have been acting on public input. Assuring that citizen ideas are being heard and used creates favorable opinions of participation policies (Carpini et al. 2004).

Effective public participation methods should be comfortable and convenient (Halvorsen 2001). The criteria described above comprehensively meet these goals of comfort and convenience. Public administrators should value the time commitment of citizens who participate, and acknowledge that time is being taken out of their schedules to participate. Administrators can respect the time of participants by being prepared for citizen engagement. As stated above, meeting facilitators should be well versed in policy, provide pertinent information

prior to meetings, and adhere to prepared agendas. Finally, public participation can be made more accessible by holding multiple public forums at different times and locations to increase accessibility.

Demystify Policy Jargon

Agencies should make efforts to simplify complex public policy for inexperienced participants. One of the barriers to effective public participation is information overload including policy jargon (Rowe and Frewer 2000, 16). Information provided for participants must be comprehensible to those receiving the information. It is important that recipients fully understand all of the information they receive (Rowe and Frewer 2005, 272).

Simplify Terms and Industry Speak

The practical ideal participation model will simplify policy terms and jargon. One of the barriers to effective public participation is that administrators feel "today's problems are too complex for the lay public to comprehend" (Baker et al. 2005, 491). This unwillingness for administrators to explain policy is frustrating for citizens, and only feeds into the public's mistrust of government.

Public employees demonstrate specific skills in order to navigate public policy, and those skills are practiced daily in their respective agencies (Kirlin 2005). Communication, organization, collective decision-making, and critical thinking are skills that public administrators must use to engage citizens. Historically, citizens may not have participated in decision-making meetings because the forums required fairly sophisticated levels of civic skills

(Kirlin 2005, 310). Therefore, it is important that administrators make certain any citizen who would like to participate, regardless of experience, is able to.

Lay Terms

Learning to write for the general public is important, and removing the jargon and shorthand that is commonly associated with government is critical in order to be effective (Kirlin 2006, 311). Public administrators should learn to "write backward" for the public. Writing backward is the practice of starting with the most important information in order to keep the reader's attention (Kirlin 2006, 311). Lowenstein agrees that public agencies "should translate professional technical jargon into common language" (Lowenstein 1971, 299).

For the purposes of this research, public administrators at the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) were interviewed and asked whether or not information for citizens is provided in lay terms.

Trained Staff

The practical ideal participation model will train staff to effectively communicate with the public. Administration staff should receive training on brokering, negotiating, and conflict resolution, as these tools are necessary when deliberating with the public (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000, 554).

King calls for a "Re-Education" of administrators that will "change their roles from that of expert managers toward that of cooperative participation or partners (King et al. 1998, 325). There will be little movement toward authentic participation and greater cynicism on the part of administrators and citizens if administrators do not develop partnerships with the public (King et

al. 1998, 325). Administrators should be familiar with their own resources, and also aware of other sources of support to better engage citizens (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000, 557). Participation processes should facilitate dialogue with citizens, obtain input from citizens, and work closely with citizens (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000; Kathlene and Martin 1991; Stout 2010).

Public administrators should be trained on how to create and maintain a working partnership with the public. In order to create this partnership, citizens must be aware that their input is needed. The participation process should allow for participants to provide feedback on the participation process (Rowe and Frewer 2005). Creating a dialogue is an important first step when training for change, and administrators must be open to receiving feedback from citizens. Administrative staff should be flexible and eager to learn how to better facilitate change (Heller and Hindle 2008, 740).

Summary of Model

The literature reviewed for this research attempts to define the practical ideal type public participation model. The ideal public participation model will use new media policies, provide convenient forums, and demystify policy jargon in order to make the process more accessible for interested parties.

The model and the associated categories of the conceptual framework are illustrated below in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Ideal Model of Public Participation Policy	
Ideal Model Categories	**Sources**

New Media Policies
• **Interactive Web Content**
   ○ **Online Surveys**
   ○ **Forums**
   ○ **E-meetings**
• **Mobile Communications**
   ○ **Text message alerts**
   ○ **Meeting announcements**.
	Abelson et al. (2003); Garrett and Jensen (2011); Kaylor et al. (2001); Kushchu and Kuscu (2003); Macintosh (2004); Rossel et al. (2006); Song and Cornford (2006)

Convenient Forums
• **Brief**
   ○ **Relevant Information**
• **Focused**
   ○ **Prepared Facilitators**
• **Frequent**
	Baker et al. (2005); Carpini et al. (2004); Halverson (2001); Holmes (2005); King et al. (1998); Rowe and Frewer (2000) (2005)

Demystify Policy Jargon • **Simplify Terms and Industry Speak** • **Trained staff**	**Denhardt and Denhardt (2000); Heller and Hindle (2008); King et al. (1998); Kirlin (2005); Lowenstein (1971); Rowe and Frewer (2005); Stout (2010)**

New media policies should be developed to utilize technology like interactive websites, mobile communications, and increased distribution of data directly to those who seek information (Macintosh 2004; Kaylor et al. 2001; Kushchu and Kuscu 2003; Song and Cornford 2006; Abelson et al. 2003). New media policies are cost efficient and effective mediums to better inform citizens. New technology will allow public agencies to develop partnerships with interested parties.

Public participation forums should be convenient for participants. New media policies will make participation more convenient, but administrators should be prepared for interactions with the public, and should value the time commitment made by citizens. The participation

forms should be brief, and should be frequent so as not to waste the public's time (Baker et al. 2005, Rowe and Frewer 2000 2005, Holmes 2005, Halverson 2001). Brief and frequent meetings will ensure the participation process is more accessible.

Public participation methods should strive to demystify policy jargon and make the process less complex, easily understandable and more accessible. Administrators should recognize that their position requires they be experts in a particular policy, and that participants are not experts in policy terms and procedures. Administrators should focus on providing information in terms the most inexperienced participant would understand (Baker et al. 2005, Kirlin 2005, Lowenstein 1971). Additionally, administrators should be trained on how to simplify policy jargon, and how to facilitate meetings with the public. Agency staff would be required to accept feedback in order to address any accessibility shortcomings (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000, King et al. 1998, Stout 2007, Heller and Hindle 2008).

Conclusion

The practical ideal model public participation model developed in this chapter was divided into categories that can be measured and will be the focus of further data collection.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Chapter Purpose

The purpose of the methodology chapter is to describe the case study methods used to examine the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) public participation policies. Focused interviews were conducted with program administrators, and public outreach personnel. The interview questions were the same for all subjects being interviewed, and were based on the practical ideal model developed in the literature review chapter (see table 2.1). The conceptual framework from the previous chapter is operationalized as referenced in Table 3.1 below.

Case Study Context

This study examines the public participation facilitation strategies for the Texas Department of Housing & Community Affairs (TDHCA). This is an excellent choice for a case study because the department oversees several programs. TDHCA facilitates its programs with state and federal guidelines, but ultimately, all program rules are reflected in the state of Texas governing statute. In addition to administering programs that directly serve Texans; the agency administration must also comply with public participation processes to obtain input on how the agency as a whole achieves its mission.

TDHCA's mission is to help Texans achieve an improved quality of life through the development of better communities. The agency achieves its mission by facilitating programs

that develop low-income housing, regulate the manufactured housing industry, and administer the state's Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) funds.

TDHCA is headed by the Governing Board appointed by the Governor. All department staff, including the Executive Director report to the six-member Board. Board Meetings are held throughout the year and the number of meetings held is at the discretion of the Board Chair. In 2011, the TDHCA Board will have met ten times. The Texas Administrative Code mandates that TDHCA hear public comment at the start of each Board Meeting (TAC Chapter 10, Part I). In addition to the public participation heard at the Board Meetings, the individual programs at TDHCA facilitate additional public participation forums. The public participation processes of these programs will be briefly discussed later in this chapter.

TDHCA Programs

Five members of TDHCA staff were interviewed about the participation processes of five programs. TDHCA staff is considered professional experts in Housing Tax Credits, the HOME program, Housing Trust Fund, Community Services, and Housing and Health Services Coordination Council (HHSC). For the purpose of this research, the individual program functions are of no concern. However, a brief summary of the programs will be provided along with a brief statement regarding the qualifications of each interviewee. No personal information from interviewees was collected or used in this research.

Executive Director of TDHCA, and Chairman of the Housing and Health Services Coordination Council (HHSC)

The Housing and Health Services Coordination Council (HHSC), consists of staff from THDCA and the Texas Health and Human Services Department. The purpose of the council as stated in Chapter 2306 of the state administrative code is **to develop and implement policies to coordinate and increase state efforts to offer service-enriched housing.** The administrative code also requires that the council be chaired by the Executive Director of TDHCA.

The current Executive Director of TDHCA has been Executive Director and Chairman of the HHSC since September of 2011. The Executive Director of TDHCA oversees all programs administered by the department, and as chairman of the HHSC works with the Health and Human Services Department to coordinate supportive services, and develop self sufficient housing programs.

The HHSC is required by Texas statute to meet quarterly, and citizen participation is heard at these meetings. Any citizen in Texas is welcome to attend the HHSC meetings, and allowed to speak in accordance with the open meetings act Section 551 of the Texas Government Code. The person or persons who would like to address the council must first fill out a witness affirmation form. The witness affirmation form identifies the speaker to the Council Chair, and briefly describes what topic will be discussed.

Director of Housing Tax Credits

The Housing Tax Credits division within TDHCA consists of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program (LIHTC) and the Tax Credit Bond Program. **Both programs are**

responsible for the development of thousands of affordable multifamily and single family affordable housing units throughout the state of Texas.

The director of Housing Tax Credits has been in the position since September of 2011. The director is responsible for overseeing the LIHTC program and the Bond programs, including the public participation practices of both programs. The LIHTC and Bond programs are both required to hold public forums throughout the year. Additionally, the Texas Government code requires that program rules are posted annually for a period of one month to receive public comment on proposed rule changes, or any other program rules (Texas Government Code 2306.1711).

Director of HOME

The HOME program is a federal program funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The purpose of the HOME program is to **expand the supply of decent, safe, affordable housing and strengthen public-private housing partnerships between Units of General Local Governments, Public Housing Authorities, nonprofits, and for profit entities.** The HOME division within TDHCA oversees the distribution of funds for the state of Texas.

The director of the HOME division has been in the position since February of 2007. The director's responsibilities include overseeing the distribution of HUD HOME funds, and ensuring the state program adheres to the federally mandated guidelines and rules. The HOME program is statutorily required to hold public participation at the Board Meetings. Additional opportunities for public participation are facilitated by the HOME program, and they will be briefly identified later in this chapter.

Manager of Housing Trust Fund

The Housing Trust Fund (HTF) **provides loans and grants to finance, acquire, rehabilitate, and develop decent, safe, and sanitary affordable housing throughout the state of Texas**. The HTF program uses Texas General Fund revenue to accomplish its mission.

The manager of HTF has held the position since 2008. The manager's responsibilities include overseeing the distribution of funds and contract management. The HTF program is not required by statute to hold public participation forums, other than at the department Board Meetings. The manager of the HTF program affirmed that additional public participation forums are held throughout the year as funds become available, and that the forums are in addition to the Board Meetings.

Project Manager – Community Services Programs

The Community Services Section at TDHCA **awards federal funds to assist local agencies providing assistance to needy Texas residents.** The Community Services Section distributes funds from the following federal programs; Community Services Block Grants, Emergency Shelter Grants Program, and Homeless Housing and Services Program.

The Director of Community Service Programs was unable to participate in the research, but the Project Manager in the Community Services section was able to participate. The Project Manager has held the position since 2004. The Project Manager oversees the contracts and planning of the Community Service Programs, which includes distributing federal funds to assist the homeless and other needy Texans.

The Community Services Section, like the tax credit program, is required to hold public forums throughout the state to solicit public comment on the distribution of funds. Unlike the tax credit program, the funding cycle is bi-annually, so public participation is only solicited every other year.

Information Dissemination

The five interviewees were selected because they each possess professional expertise in a program administered by TDHCA. The participants in this research were all asked identical questions from the Operationalization table in Chapter Three. The interview questions were developed using the conceptual framework table (chapter two) as a guide. Each interviewee read and signed a consent form which included the research purpose.

Table 4.1 in Chapter Four will present the data gathered from the focused interviews. Each interview question is listed in the left-hand column. The next column contains a TDHCA score that ranges from 0 to 5. A score of zero indicates that none of the programs administered by TDHCA meet the ideal characteristic of the model. A score of five indicates that all five programs meet the ideal characteristic of the model. The ideal characteristics are the same as identified in the conceptual framework (see table 2.1).

Data Collection

Data will be collected by conducting structured interviews with TDHCA staff. Purposive sampling techniques were used to select the interview participants (Babbie 2010). Program

directors were interviewed because they are the "experts" responsible for each program. The interviews took place between October 21st and October 25th 2011.

In addition to the structured interviews, TDHCA governing statute was also referenced (Texas Government Code, Title 10, Chapter 2306) to identify what public participation processes were statutorily mandated. When available, public participation meeting information was reviewed to determine how closely the processes adhere to the ideal model of public participation policies.

Respondents

Five interviews were conducted with the following program staff at TDHCA: Director of Housing Tax Credits, Director of HOME, Project Manager of Community Services, Manager of Housing Trust Fund, and the Executive Director who also chairs the Housing and Health Services Coordination Council.

Human Subjects Protection

Prior to conducting interviews with TDHCA staff, this research was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas State University-San Marcos. The IRB determined that this research was exempt from formal review (IRB application number 2011K1634).

The interviewees signed a consent form prior to participating in the research. The consent form briefly described the purpose of the research, assured the participants that no personal information would be collected or included in the research findings, and that there was minimal risk involved in participating in the research. None of the interviewees were compensated for their time or participation in the research.

Operationalization of the Conceptual Framework

Table 3.1 presents the Operationalization of the conceptual framework from Chapter Two (see table 2.1). The Operationalization Table consists of two columns. The left column is the characteristics of the ideal public participation policy. The column on the right are the interview questions used to gauge how closely the public participation policies of the various programs come to the ideal model. The participant responses were coded 1 for yes and 0 for no and will be further analyzed in Chapter Four.

Table 3.1: Operationalization of the Conceptual Framework

Ideal Model Categories	Interview Question
New Media Policies	
Interactive Web Content	
Online Surveys	1. Does your program use online surveys to solicit information from the public?
Forums	2. Does your program use online forums to communicate with the public? 3. If so, are the online forums used program specific?
E-meetings	4. Does your program conduct E-Meetings as a tool for public participation?
Mobile Communications	
Text message alerts	5. Does your program use text messaging or other mobile communication to interact with the public?
Meeting announcements	6. Are meetings announced via text messaging, Facebook, Twitter? 7. Are meetings announcements made using any other social media outlet?
Convenient Forums	
Brief	
Relevant Information	8. Is relevant and background information provided prior to participation forums (including meeting rules)?
Focused	
Meeting goals and purpose Agenda adhered to	9. Are the goals and purpose of participation forums clearly stated prior to meetings? 10. Is an agenda provided and adhered to?
Frequent	
Meetings held throughout the year	11. How many meetings are held throughout the year? 12. Is there an opportunity for more if

	necessary?
Demystify Policy Jargon	
Simplify Terms and Industry Speak	
Policy terms are defined	13. Is time taken to define policy jargon during or prior to the meeting? 14. Is all documentation provided for citizens in lay terms?
Additional information provided	15. Are resources provided for more clarification on all agenda items, or policy terms? 16. Are web links to relevant information provided prior to public forums?
Trained staff	
Workshops	17. Is staff trained on how to facilitate public participation forums?

New Media Policies

The focused interviews will attempt to gather data on how TDHCA programs use new media to facilitate public participation processes. The practical ideal public participation policy will use new media to facilitate interactive web content, and will use mobile communication devices to increase accessibility.

Interactive Web Content

The use of online surveys is determined using the following question: **Does your program use online surveys to solicit information from the public?**

TDHCA staff members were asked about online forums; **Does your program use online forums to communicate with the public?** The follow up question for those who answered yes was; **If so, are the online forums program specific?**

E-Meetings were identified as one way to increase accessibility of public participation processes. The purpose of the interview question is to determine how accessible public

participation processes are at TDHCA. The question is important, because TDHCA administers

programs throughout the state, but does not have the resources to hold public forums in every

town and city for each program. **Does your program conduct E-meetings as a tool for public**

participation?

Mobile Communications

The literature review chapter identified mobile communications as a new media tool to

enhance accessibility of public participation processes. The percent of Americans using mobile

devices to connect to the internet has increased, and mobile devices are an efficient way to

directly contact participants (Kushchu and Kuscu 2003). The interview questions regarding

mobile communications were as follows; **Does your program use text messaging or other**

mobile communication to interact with the public?

The interviews attempted to determine whether or not TDHCA utilized mobile

communication techniques to relay meeting information to potential participants. **Are meetings**

announced via text messaging, Facebook, Twitter? Are meetings announcements made

using any other social media outlet?

The data collected from interviews and the documents reviewed are analyzed and

discussed further in the results chapter.

Convenient Forums

The interviews will attempt to gather data about public meetings facilitated by TDHCA

for the five aforementioned programs. The literature identified inconvenient forums as a barrier

to public participation. Therefore, the ideal public participation policy will take the necessary measures to ensure the public participation forums are convenient.

One way that administrators can make participation more convenient is having brief participation forums. **Is relevant and background information provided prior to participation forums?** This question was included in the interview in order to determine whether TDHCA participation policies provide any relevant documentation prior to meetings in order to improve the quality of participation.

According to the conceptual framework, public participation forums should be focused. In order to be respectful of participant's time, administrators should clearly state the purpose and goals of the participation forum. **Are the goals and purpose of participation forums clearly stated prior to meetings?** Administrators should also publish and adhere to an agenda when facilitating public meetings. **Is an agenda provided and adhered to?**

The conceptual framework in chapter two identified frequent forums as a characteristic of the ideal public participation policy. More opportunities to participate increase the accessibility of the public participation process. The interviewees were asked; **How many meetings are held throughout the year? Is there an opportunity for more if necessary?** The purpose of these questions is to determine how accessible the participation process for citizens.

Demystify Policy Jargon

The practical ideal public participation policy will ensure that information provided to citizens is comprehensible to the layperson. Public administrators are professional experts, and should acknowledge that the average layperson will not be as familiar with policy terms or industry jargon.

The ideal participation model indicates that resources should be provided to citizens that clearly explain policy terms. **Is time taken to define policy jargon during or prior to the meeting?** In addition to explaining policy terms, when administrators provide background information, care should be taken to ensure the language is in its most basic terms and concepts. **Is all documentation provided for citizens in lay terms?**

Administrators should provide resources for participants to learn more about any agenda item being considered, including background information. **Are resources provided for more clarification on all agenda items, or policy terms?** Resources could include additional online information. **Are web links to relevant information provided prior to public forums?**

The final interview question concerned training of program staff. **Is staff trained on how to facilitate public participation forums?** The literature reviewed identified trained staff as an ideal characteristic of public participation process. Program staff should be trained on how to write for the public, and on how to facilitate public meetings.

Potential Weaknesses of Methodology

The interviews conducted with TDHCA staff and the corresponding meeting information will give insight into the public participation processes of the department. One potential weakness of the methodology is that citizen participants were not interviewed.
Some of the interview questions asked of TDHCA staff may have significant bias. For example, the questions regarding policy jargon may not be as insightful as originally planned. What TDHCA staff considers "basic terms" and "comprehensible" may not be considered so by a citizen unfamiliar with TDHCA programs. Further research into citizen responses to TDHCA participation policies may be warranted and discussed in the conclusion chapter.

Chapter 4

Results

Chapter Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to review the data collected from the focused interview questions developed in Chapter Three (see Operationalization table 3.1). Five staff members at TDHCA were interviewed regarding the public participation processes of five programs administered by TDHCA. The responses to the interview questions have been recorded electronically and the remainder of this chapter will gauge TDHCA participation policies to the practical ideal developed in Chapter Two (see conceptual framework table 2.1).

Results

Table 4.1 summarizes the results of the study. This research used five programs administered by TDHCA to gauge how closely the department's public participation policies come to the ideal model. The results table below lists the characteristics of the ideal model directly from the conceptual framework (see table 2.1). The next column assigns a score 0 through 5, whereby a score of 0 indicates none of the five programs meet the ideal for that particular characteristic. A score of 5 indicates that all five TDHCA programs meet the ideal for that characteristic. The programs that do meet the ideal are listed for each category as reference. If all five programs met the ideal for a category, then TDHCA scored a five. The interviewee responses will be analyzed according to the practical ideal characteristics.

Table 4.1 - Results

Characteristics of the Ideal Model	TDHCA Score 0-5	Specific Programs	Comments
New Media Policies			
Interactive Web Content			
1. Use of online surveys to solicit information from the public	1	HOME	
2. Use of online forums to communicate with the public.	1	Tax Credits	
3. Online forums used are program specific.	No	Tax Credits	Online forums used for all Tax Credit Programs (9% & 4%)
4. E-Meetings used as a tool for public participation.	4	HOME Tax Credits Housing Trust Fund Community Services	
Mobile Communications			
5. Use of text messaging or other mobile communication to interact with the public.	0		
6. Meetings announced via text messaging, Facebook, Twitter.	0		
7. Meeting announcements made using any other social media outlet.	0		All interviewees cited LISTSERV[1]
Convenient Forums			
Brief			
8. Relevant and background information provided prior to participation forums (including meeting rules).	5	HHSC HOME Tax Credits Housing Trust Fund Community Services	

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[1] LISTSERV is an email software program which sends emails to large groups of subscribers

Focused			
9. The goals and purpose of participation forums clearly stated prior to meetings.	4	HHSC HOME Tax Credits Community Services	
10. Agenda is provided and adhered to.	3	HHSC Tax Credits Community Services	
Frequent			
11. Multiple meetings held throughout the year.	5	HHSC HOME Tax Credits Housing Trust Fund Community Services	Four meetings Several meetings Several meetings Two meetings Six meetings
12. There is an opportunity for more if necessary.	5	HHSC HOME Tax Credits Housing Trust Fund Community Services	All programs have ability to increase the number of participation forums.
Demystify Policy Jargon			
Simplify Policy and Industry Terms			
13. Time is taken to define policy jargon during or prior to meetings.	3	HHSC Housing Trust Fund Community Services	Community Services allows users to post questions for staff prior to meeting forums
14. Documents provided for citizens are in lay terms.	1	HHSC	
15. Resources are provided for more clarification on all agenda items, and policy terms.	3	HHSC Tax Credits Housing Trust Fund	
16. Web links to relevant information are provided prior to public forums.	5	HHSC HOME Tax Credits Housing Trust Fund Community Services	All programs indicated that web links were provided via LISTSERV
Trained Staff			
17. Staff is trained on how to facilitate public participation forums.	2	HOME Community Services	Both programs indicated that not all staff receives training.

New Media Policies

Interactive Web Content - Use of Online Surveys

The interviewees were asked if their program used *online surveys to solicit information from the public*. The practical ideal public participation policy will use interactive web content as a tool for two-way interaction between administrators and citizens. Online surveys are an effective tool administrators can use to encourage citizen participation and communication (Kaylor et al. 2001).

TDHCA scored 1 out of 5 possible points for this characteristic. Only the HOME program at TDHCA identified online surveys as a tool for soliciting information from the public. The director of HOME stated that online surveys were not consistently used, but that surveys have been used in the past using Surveymonkey.com. The online surveys used by the HOME program were used to receive feedback on proposed changes to the HOME rules.

Use of Online Forums

Interviewees were asked if their program *uses online forums to communicate with the public*. Online discussion forums also promote communication with the public. Online forums allow administrators to communicate with a larger audience over further distances, and are more convenient for citizens. Larger pools of participants and their unique ideas about policy will give administrators more insight on how to meet the needs of the community.

TDHCA scored a 1 out of 5 for using online forums as an interactive web tool. The only program at TDHCA that reported using online forums as a method of communicating with the public was the Housing Tax Credits program. The director of Housing Tax Credits responded that the program used online forums within the last year to solicit feedback on proposed rule

changes to the Housing Tax Credit program. The content of the online forum was specific to the

Housing Tax Credit program, and according to the Director, the forums may be used again to

solicit feedback.

The HHSC did not report using online forums as a means to communicate with the

public, but it should be noted that the HHSC recently launched an online discussion forum to

communicate with the public. The forum had not been started at the time of the interview, but is

now online.

The project manager in the Community services section stated that online forums were

not used as means to communicate with the public. However, citizens that attend public hearings

of the Community Services Section are able to post questions online, and TDHCA staff responds

to the questions.

Use of E-meetings

Interviewees were asked if their program used *E-Meetings as a tool for public*

participation. E-meetings, as identified in Chapter 2, should be used by administrators because

they allow citizens to participate even if they are physically unable to attend a meeting. The

practical ideal public participation policy uses e-meetings to increase the accessibility to public

participation forums.

TDHCA scored 0 out of 5 for this item, because none of the programs identified using e-

meetings to communicate with the public. However it should be noted that all of the interviewees

stated that webinars are routinely used as a means to conduct trainings with the public. The staff

at TDHCA all indicated that the webinars were used for training individuals that would be

directly applying for funding from the Department, and not for the general public.

Four of the five interviewees acknowledged that webinars have been used as a training tool for applicants seeking funding. Webinars would meet the ideal model if they were used as a means to communicate with the public. The webinars are currently being used as means to train the development community about application processes and rules.

Mobile Communications – Use of Text Messaging

The interviewees were asked if their program *used text messaging or any other mobile communication to interact with the public.* The literature review chapter identified mobile communications as a characteristic of the ideal public participation policy. Mobile communications and text messaging were identified as characteristics of the ideal public participation policy because mobile devices are increasingly becoming a more common method for citizens to access online content.

TDHCA scored 0 out of 5 for this item as well. None of the interviewees identified using text messaging or any other mobile device as a way to communicate with the public. TDHCA does not meet the ideal model for this category. The department should use text messaging as a way to inform citizens about participation opportunities, send reminders of meetings, and notify citizens about new information available.

Meetings announced via Text Messaging or Social Media

Interviewees were asked if participation *meetings were announced via text messages, Facebook, or Twitter.* A follow-up question asked the participants whether *meetings were announced via any other social media tool.* The practical ideal public participation policy will use mobile applications to communicate with the public. Mobile applications like Facebook and

Twitter are excellent tools to provide meeting information, and announcement for opportunities to participate.

TDHCA scored 0 out of 5 for both these public participation characteristics. The interviewees all confirmed that the programs at TDHCA do not use mobile communication tools such as Facebook and Twitter. It should be noted that the Manager of the Housing Trust Fund also sits on a social media committee at the department. TDHCA will begin using social media tools, including Facebook and Twitter, by the end of 2011.

All five interviewees indicated that LISTSERV emails are routinely used to communicate with the public. The LISTSERV is currently the most substantial tool used by TDHCA to get information out to citizens. Public participation opportunities and department announcements are made using the LISTSERV system. Use of the LISTSERV was not counted as mobile communication or as a social media tool because information is only sent one way, and the ideal public participation new media policy will use two-way communication to create a dialogue with the public.

Social Media tools like Facebook and Twitter should be used in conjunction with the LISTSERV system to give notice of participation opportunities and to provide links to relevant information. The LISTSERV system does not meet the ideal model of public participation because in order to receive the emails, a citizen must go to the TDHCA website, find the link to sign up for the LISTSERV and subscribe to topics of concern. Social media tools like Facebook and Twitter allow users to more easily connect with the Department by using online networks to share likes, dislikes, and current events.

Convenient Forums

Brief

The ideal public participation policy will ensure participation forums are convenient. One way to ensure participation forums are convenient is to keep forums brief. One of the barriers to increased public participation is lack of time. Administrators should be respectful of the time taken to participate.

Relevant and Background Information Provided

Interviewees were asked *if relevant and background information provided prior to participation forums (including meeting rules).* The literature review chapter stated that all relevant and background information should be provided prior to participation meetings so as to keep meetings as brief as possible.

TDHCA scored 5 out of 5 for this item. All of the interviewees indicated that relevant information is provided prior to public participation forums. Two of the interviewees stated the LISTSERV system provides relevant information prior to participation forums. Additionally, the Director of Housing Tax Credits confirmed the program webpage is updated prior to participation meetings with relevant information.

TDHCA meets the ideal public participation model for this category because relevant information is available prior to public participation meetings. This process could be improved if mobile communication and social media tools were used to increase awareness of the information.

Focused

The ideal public participation policy ensures forums are convenient by conducting focused meetings. Chapter Two explained that administrators can ensure meetings are focused by clearly stating the goals and purpose of the meetings at the beginning of the participation forum.

Goals and Purpose of Meetings Clearly Stated

Interviewees were asked if *the goals and purpose of participation forums clearly stated prior to meetings*.

With regard to the goals and purpose of participation forums being clearly stated prior to meetings, TDHCA scored 4 out of 5. The Housing Trust Fund was the only program that did not state the goals and purpose of the participation forum prior to the start of the meetings. The program manager stated that the purpose and goals of the forums is provided via LISTSERV in advance of the participation meetings.

The ideal public participation policy begins public participation forums by clearly stating the purpose of the meeting. Stating the purpose and goals of the meetings keeps the meeting focused and on task.

Agenda is Provided

Focused forums include providing an agenda and adhering to said agenda. Interviewees were asked if *an agenda is provided and adhered to.* TDHCA scored 3 out of 5 with regard to providing and adhering to an agenda at participation forums. The HOME program and the Housing Trust Fund program do not provide agendas prior to participation forums. The

director of HOME stated that agendas are not provided because the participation forums focus

solely on the HOME program and the current Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA).

The Housing Trust Fund manager provided a similar explanation of why agendas are not

provided prior to participation forums. The HTF program manager stated that public forums are

held bi-annually when funding becomes available and the associated round tables focus only on

the current NOFA. Neither program keeps meeting minutes or records attendance at the round

table forums.

TDHCA programs meet the ideal model participation policy because the participation

forums are focused on specific programs. However, it is worth briefly discussing the public

participation forums at the TDHCA Board Meetings. Public comment is heard at the beginning

of each Board meeting, and there is no purpose or agenda for the public comment heard.

This process does not meet the ideal model because department staff may not be prepared

to adequately address the concerns of the citizens. If department staff is unable to address the

concerns, then the discussion will be added to the next Board meetings agenda for further

discussion, and requires more commitment from the citizen. The public comment process at

TDHCA Board meetings should accept witness affirmation forms online prior meetings to ensure

staff is prepared.

Frequent

The ideal public participation policy holds frequent participation forums. One of the

barriers to participation is that meeting times are held at inconvenient times and locations (King

et al. 1998). By holding frequent forums, citizens have more opportunities to participate and

share ideas. Interviewees were asked *how many meetings are held throughout the year,* and if *there is an opportunity for more if necessary.*

TDHCA scored 5 out of 5 for both items because each program holds frequent public participation forums, and all five programs can increase the number of forums if necessary. The Housing Trust Fund program only administered two public participation forums within the last year, which was the fewest of the five programs studied. The program manager indicated that limited funding resources diminished the need for more participation forums, but that if more funds became available for allocation, then more public participation forums would be held.

The Housing Tax Credit program and the HOME program hold several public participation forums throughout the year. The director of Housing Tax Credits stated that citizens have several opportunities to participate in the tax credit process. The tax credit program is statutorily mandated to hold three public hearings annually regarding the tax credit program. In 2011 the tax credit program held seven public hearings throughout the state. A public hearing was held in Austin, Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Harlingen, El Paso and Lubbock. The tax credit program also conducted an online forum to increase public participation.

Public comment is also heard at the beginning of each Board Meeting. Citizens are allowed to comment on any of the programs administered by TDHCA at the Board meetings. In 2010 the TDHCA Board heard public comment at all twelve meetings, and the topics varied from TDHCA policies, requests for funding, and program rules.

Demystify Policy Jargon

Simplify Terms and Industry Speak

The practical ideal public participation policy will demystify policy jargon by simplifying terms and "industry speak" when writing for the public. Administrators haven't always sought public input on policy, and some administrators feel citizens are too uninformed to make effective comment on policy issues (Baker 2005).

Policy Jargon Defined

It is the responsibility of administrators to ensure any citizen who would like to participate can do so, and this includes providing simplified documents for the average lay person. TDHCA staff was asked whether time is *taken to define policy jargon during or prior to the meeting.*

TDHCA scored 3 out of 5 for this item, with two programs stating that time is not taken during participation meetings to explain policy terms. The Housing Tax Credit program and HOME program do not take time out of participation forums to explain policy terms. Both staff members of the Housing Tax Credit program and HOME program stated that they rely on personal conversations at the close of meetings to further explain any confusing topics.

Explaining policy terms to individuals after public meetings does not meet the ideal type because it increases the time commitment for citizens. The limited number of staff at public hearings allows a few citizens to monopolize administrator time, and inhibits the public hearing process.

The project manager of the Community Services section stated that participants at meetings are allowed to post questions to a Frequently Asked Questions link on the program's

webpage. This allows Community Service staff to address more questions from more citizens. This process appears to be more effective than the personal conversations technique used by the Housing Tax Credits and HOME programs, because citizens have are able to have their questions answered, and the questions are posted for everyone to see.

The personal conversations held by the Housing Tax Credit and HOME programs are inefficient because their answers are only heard by a select few. An online posting of Frequently Asked Questions is more efficient, and effective, because the same questions are not answered multiple times, and questions that might not have been asked by one citizen may be asked by another.

Information Provided in Lay Terms

Interviewees were asked; *Is all documentation provided for citizens in lay terms?* TDHCA scored 1 out of 5 for this item, with only the Chairman of the HHSC stating that documents provided for citizens is in lay terms. Each of the other interviewees believes the information provided for public participation forums is not in the simplest form. Additionally, each of the interviewees stated that documentation provided at participation forums would only make sense to applicants seeking funding or citizens already familiar with the programs.

TDHCA does not meet the ideal model for this category because department staff does not prepare documents for laypersons. The ideal model participation policy assumes that all participants have no previous knowledge of administration programs and rules. TDHCA staff should re-word policy terms in language that is familiar to non-professional citizens. Program rules at TDHCA are often directly taken from the governing statute, which is difficult reading for

someone not familiar with statutory language. Administrators at TDHCA should interpret program rules so they are more easily understood while maintaining the intent of the statutes.

Additional Resources Provided

TDHCA interview participants were asked whether *resources* were (sic) *provided for more clarification on all agenda items, or policy terms.* TDHCA scored 3 out of 5 for this item because neither the HOME program nor the Community Services section provides information on agenda items or policy terms. Both interviewees for the two programs stated that information is provided prior to meetings, but not upon arrival of participants at forums.

The HTF, Community Services, and Housing Tax Credit programs all provide additional resources at public forums for citizens. The resources provided are relevant to the topics being discussed at the forum. The HTF program provides information about the NOFA being discussed at the participation forum. Similarly, the Community Services Section provides citizens with information regarding the current NOFA.

The Housing Tax Credits program provides information relevant to the public participation forum. At the seven public hearings held throughout the state, the tax credit program provides information regarding the current tax credit application cycle.

Web Links Provided

TDHCA staff members were asked a final question regarding simplified policy jargon, which was closely related to the previous question about resources provided at participation forums. Interviewees were asked whether *web links to relevant information* are (sic) *provided prior to public forums.*

TDHCA scored 5 out of 5 for this item, with all programs providing web links to relevant information prior to public forums. All five interviewees cited the LISTSERV system as the tool used to send web links about upcoming participation forums.

TDHCA meets the ideal model for this category, however, it should be noted that the web links would be viewed by more citizens if TDHCA adopted some of the new media policies previously discussed in chapter three.

Trained Staff

The practical ideal public participation policy will ensure staff is trained to facilitate public participation forums. Denhardt writes that public administrators should be trained on how to work with the public and develop working relationships with the public (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000). The interviewees were asked whether staff is *trained on how to facilitate public participation forums.*

TDHCA scored 2 out of 5 for this item. Only the HOME and the Community Services section have trained staff to facilitate public participation forums. It should be noted that both the HOME and Community Services section do not train all staff to facilitate the public participation forums. This training is conducted in workshops held annually. The HOME department trains staff internally on how to facilitate meetings, and training is done by one of the managers in the HOME department. The Community Services Section works with an independent third party to train staff.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the Texas Department of Housing & Community Affairs scored 42 out of a possible 80 points. TDHCA public participation policies do not meet the ideal model. The public participation processes should be reviewed and additional steps taken to improve the participation experience for citizens and public administrators. The five TDHCA programs should be reviewed more closely in order to better understand how TDHCA can improve its processes.

When TDHCA programs are examined individually, the Housing Tax Credit Program, Community Services Section, and HHSC best meet the practical ideal type with scores of 9 out of 16 possible (see Table 5.1 below). The Housing Trust Fund does the poorest job but this is explained by not using agendas at public participation forums, and not training staff to facilitate public participation forums. Table 5.1 below illustrates how closely the programs scored and how far each program is from the ideal model from the conceptual framework.

Table 5.1 – TDHCA Program Scores	
TDHCA Program	**Score 0-16**
1. Housing Tax Credits	9
2. Community Services Section	9
3. HHSC	9
4. HOME	8
5. Housing Trust Fund	7

The ideal public participation policy will use new media, convenient forums, and simplified policy terms in order to connect with disenfranchised citizens that have the most

interest in affordable housing. The participation policies will increase accessibility to the administrative process, and will increase the diversity of typical participants.

Chapter five will further gauge TDHCA policies against the conceptual framework, and will strategize how to improve the public participation policies at TDHCA.

Chapter 5

Recommendations and Conclusion

Chapter Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to identify how public participation policies can be improved at TDHCA. The categories of the conceptual framework identified specific characteristics of the practical ideal public participation policy, and this chapter will give specific suggestions of how TDHCA can meet the practical ideal model. The chapter will conclude with suggestions for further research and how this research can be improved.

Practical Ideal Public Participation Policy

New Media Policies

New media policies should be adopted by TDHCA to increase awareness of participation opportunities, and encourage two-way communications with the public. New media policies are an excellent tool to provide information to citizens prior to public participation forums. However, as illustrated on the results table 4.1 TDHCA only scored six points out of fifteen possible.

There is clearly room for improvement by wider adoption of new media tools. TDHCA programs should consider adopting online forums and e-meetings as additional methods of public participation. Implementing new media policies like e-meetings and online forums keep public forums brief because fewer people will have to physically attend meetings if they are able

to participate online. These online tools also make participating easier because participation forums can be difficult to attend if the time or location is inconvenient.

For example, the Housing Tax Credit program is statutorily required to hold three public hearings a year. The program held seven public hearings in seven different cities, but in a state as large as Texas, a majority of citizens were still unable to participate. It would be logistically impossible to hold public forums in every city and town in Texas, so administrators at TDHCA should use online tools to increase policy accessibility and collaboration.

TDHCA should also embrace the growing market of mobile devices as tools for communication. Mobile devices are becoming a bigger part of society and changing the way people access online content. TDHCA would be wise to take advantage of the multiple functions available on mobile devices. A text-message to a phone can now include web-links to public participation information, and the links can be accessed directly from a mobile phone

Public participation policies at TDHCA should use social media to increase awareness of participation opportunities, and updated information as it becomes available. Social media tools like Facebook and Twitter make perfect sense for public agencies because they are free to use, and help reach a wider audience. The principal of social media is that user contacts and networks distribute information faster than traditional tools like email.

The new media polices will not improve participation for those without internet access or skills. However, administrators at TDHCA should be encouraged by the growing number of mobile phone users, and the increasing functionality of mobile phones. By increasing the methods of communication, TDHCA will improve public participation and public policy.

Convenient Forums

The TDHCA programs came most closely to the ideal model of convenient forums, and scored 22 out of 25 possible points for these categories. TDHCA programs have policies in place to ensure participation forums are brief, focused, and frequent.

Brief

TDHCA should adopt new media policies as previously discussed in order to increase the convenience of participation for citizens. The new media policies will allow TDHCA staff to provide more information and increase awareness of relevant information prior to meetings. Enacting new media policies in conjunction with providing relevant information prior to meetings could potentially increase participation and improve policy suggestions from the public.

Focused

The only areas in which TDHCA did not score 5 out of 5 had to do with participation forums being focused. Cheryl King and others identified poorly run meetings as a consistent complaint citizens had when attending public forums (King et al. 1998). TDHCA should enact an agency wide policy that all public participation forums should clearly state the purpose and goals of the meetings, and should also provide agendas to keep the meetings on track.

It is worth noting that as of this writing the TDHCA Governing Board is considering a resolution to limit public comment at Board Meetings to items specifically listed on the agenda. This proposed change will improve the participation process by keeping the Board meetings

focused, and ensuring department staff is prepared to discuss any comments made by the public. The proposed rule change will also keep Board meetings brief.

Again, new media policies should be enacted to help keep meetings focused. Mobile devices could be used by TDHCA to send reminders about participation opportunities, and the messages could include the purpose of the meeting along with a link to the most recent agenda.

For example, the Director of the HOME program stated that "round-table" meetings were held to obtain public comment on proposed rule changes. Prior to the round-table, a reminder could be sent via text, Facebook, and Twitter. The message would primarily serve as a reminder of the date, time, and location of the round-table. The reminder would also contain links to the department's website where an agenda and the proposed rule changes had been posted.

Frequent

TDHCA meets the ideal model for convenient forums by holding frequent participation meetings. However, the processes at TDHCA could be improved still, if online forums and e-meetings were used as participation tools. Each interviewee affirmed the ability to increase the number of participation forums, which should include additional participation methods like e-meetings, online surveys and online forums.

Demystify Policy Jargon

The practical ideal public participation policy will demystify policy jargon by simplifying the terms for laypersons. Administrators should simplify policy and industry terms, and also train staff on how to facilitate public participation forums.

Simplify Policy and Industry Terms

TDHCA scored 12 out of 20 points for this category. Four of the five interviewees did not think the information provided for citizens was in lay terms. Clearly, TDHCA does not meet the ideal type public participation model for this category. TDHCA can improve their process by summarizing documentation so that it is easier to understand. Administrators at TDHCA are paid experts in housing programs. The language used internally may be easily understood by department staff, but administrators should not take for granted the fact that citizens are not paid experts in housing programs. TDHCA should evaluate the information provided to citizens to ensure all documents for the public are brief, simple, and free of acronyms.

Administrators at TDHCA should make an effort to communicate with the public in terms easily understood, which may include a re-education of writing styles. TDHCA could improve written communication with the public by conducting a survey of previous participants on how well information was presented. Administrators could also seek out interns in an MPA program to help re-write policy documents for the public.

Trained Staff

Only two programs provide staff training on how to facilitate public participation forums, which is why TDHCA does not meet the ideal type for training staff. Public administrators at TDHCA should not only be well versed in policy issues, but also in communicating with the public. When public administrators are trained on how to run a meeting they make themselves more accessible to the public, and improve relationships with the public as well.

TDHCA should allocate time to train staff on how to write for the public, which would include summarizing and re-wording statutes to make documents easier to understand. TDHCA

should also train staff on how to orally communicate with the public. Administrators are often too insulated from the public and can lose sight of their role as public servants. TDHCA should train staff on ways to make participation more accessible for the public.

Administrators at TDHCA should receive training on how to run an effective meeting, which would include time management, and how to keep meetings on task. Multiple staff should receive the training, because one person cannot run a participation forum effectively. Administrators must be reminded that participation forums are opportunities to listen and learn from the public, and not arenas to placate citizens. Genuinely listening to the public may seem arduous at first, but by holding focused, frequent forums, the attitudes of the citizens and administrators should improve.

Conclusions

The introduction chapter identified how New England Town Meetings represent an idea of how democracy should work. Ideally, democracy allows for all citizens to participate and shape how their government works for them. As the towns in New England grew, participation in the Town Meetings declined because the everyday lives of citizens interfered with their ability to commit an entire day to participate.

This research showed that citizen time is precious, and it is the responsibility of public administrators to encourage citizens to participate in the formation of policy, and to make participation as convenient as possible. Citizens have a unique perspective when it comes to public policy, because they live their lives within the policy parameters developed by public administrators.

Effective public participation policies are important because the relationship between citizens and public administrators has deteriorated. Administrator attitudes have dismissed citizens as uninterested and uninformed nuisances that prevent good policy. Citizens have come to view public administrators and government as large bureaucratic machines that do not value their opinions. By adhering to the ideal model public participation practices, these relationships can slowly be healed.

Effective public participation policies are also important because they can help create relationships with citizens that have never been asked to participate in the administrative process. Citizens that have historically been unrepresented in public policy discussions will finally be able to provide input on policies that directly affect their lives.

The ideal model of public participation developed in this research makes the process of participation easier for citizens. From the perspective of public administrators, making the participation process more accessible will increase the likelihood citizens will take time to participate. Federal, State and Local government belong to the citizens, and the ideal public participation policies developed in this research give administrators the tools to make government a reflection of the community.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research can be done regarding public participation policies and the practices at THDCA. This research did not consider the opinions of citizens who have previously participated in TDHCA forums. TDHCA keeps records of those who have participated in the past; however, these citizens did not give TDHCA the authority to contact them for any follow-up research. TDHCA staff is considering revising the participation consent forms to include such

a statement, which will allow staff to request more information regarding participation processes. This research would make an excellent starting point to survey citizens that have participated in state government to determine how closely other agencies come to the ideal model public participation policy.

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