

Surroundings

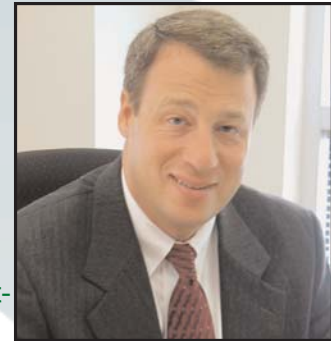


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Public Participation in the Section 106 Process

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Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires that local communities be allowed to voice their concerns and share information when cultural resources may be affected by federally funded or permitted activities. A well-developed public involvement program can be a vital tool in the project development process, working in tandem with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Public participation in the Section 106 process is key to the success of any infrastructure improvement. It eliminates uncertainty within the community and invites the public to help influence the outcome of the project. A successful program meets the following goals:

- Provides the public with information so that they can understand the process, the resources, and how they may participate;
- Provides opportunities for the sharing of opinions and offering of relevant information;
- Explains the rationale behind individual projects;
- Ensures that all interested parties have the chance to participate in a meaningful way.

Who is the Public?

The question of "Who is the Public" may vary from project to project and ranges from a small number of local residents to a large list of interested parties. For a small bridge replacement with few cultural resource issues, the public, for Section 106 purposes, may be limited to local residents, the local historical society, and the State Historic Preservation Office. For larger projects, or those that may have impacts to cultural resources, the list would be expanded to include local archaeological societies, planning departments, governmental officials, and potentially Native American Tribes. Section 106 strongly urges federal agencies to involve the interested public throughout the process. As stated in NHPA, "The views of the public are essential to informed Federal decision-making in the section 106 process. The agency official shall seek and consider the views of the public..." (36 CFR 800.2(d)1). The value of informed public participation during the process cannot be underestimated.

Care must be taken to ensure that important groups have not been excluded. It may be a challenge to encourage the active involvement of groups that are not typically involved in project development and decision-making, such as recent immigrants and groups whose traditional cultures rely on different processes of group decision-making. Examples of such groups may include the Old Order Amish,

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Native American tribes, or elders in some Asian-American communities. These groups may need special attention in order to ensure the incorporation of their views into the planning process.

What is an Appropriate Level of Participation?

Depending upon the size, complexity, or controversial nature of a project, the public's interest may vary substantially, but it is incumbent upon the project sponsor to elicit input from the potentially affected parties. The first step is to prepare a mailing list that identifies the groups and individuals who should be made aware of projects, and to invite them to participate in the process. The public should be solicited to offer information on significant cultural resources in the area, regarding both historic structures and archaeological sites, so that project planners have as much information as possible when making critical project decisions. Participation during this stage could include meetings, mailings, website solicitations, and other tools.



Public meetings such as this one provide an excellent opportunity to work with the community on cultural resources issues.

Positive Results

Undertaking a successful Section 106 public participation program entails developing a well thought-out effort to educate the public on the process, solicit their input, and inform them on project decisions at the appropriate time. The public's views and ideas should be incorporated into the process in a meaningful manner. The local residents and organizations have a vested interest in their community and resources, and it is the responsibility of the agency to ensure these voices are heard. When the public works in concert with the project development team, a successful project will result.

Tips for Success:

- Identify the critical organizations and individuals to involve;
- Coordinate the process with the lead agency;
- Present accurate information to the public at each stage;
- Solicit the public's input and take it seriously;
- Educate the public on the Section 106 process;
- Document the entire process.

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