

Local Advisory Committees: *Meaningful(?)* Audience Involvement

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How does one make involvement in architectural and exhibit design processes meaningful for audiences? Recently I created local advisory committees as representatives of the supporting agencies and visitors to three small interpretive centers adjoining freshwater fish hatcheries in British Columbia. The first committee has transformed into a non-profit support society, the Fish In Need Society (F.I.N.S.), and there are plans for another support society for the Visitors Centre at the Vancouver Island Trout Hatchery. This paper describes the process of developing a Local Advisory Committee (LAC), warns of pitfalls, and rejoices in the benefits of meaningful participation.

Who Is the Audience?

At the two larger interpretive centers (over 6,000 square feet), studies were undertaken to determine a visitor profile. The first study was for an existing facility that would undergo major renovations (Underhill, 1991). Guest books and attendance records were employed to determine who visited. Personal interviews with past visitors cast light on why people visited. Potential visitors were identified during interviews with municipalities, regional districts, school boards, and the Ministry of Tourism. One of the most surprising revelations was that the majority of visitors were local residents (within 50 km); staff had thought that tourists constituted a larger percentage of the visitors, since the center is located adjacent to the Trans Canada highway.

The second facility was to be newly constructed. A telephone survey of ninety residents was used to develop resident visitor projections, give directions to the type of displays at the Interpretive Centre, and identify the type of people expected to visit (Andrusiak, 1991). The response to the survey revealed that the community would accept the new facility as a positive addition to their community (the hatchery and Centre were proposed for a suburban area). Participants showed more interest in live interpretation than in all the non-personal media forms. Tourist visitor projections were drawn from highway counts and from attendance at comparable tourist

interviews with school district representatives and comparable tourist attractions. A list of special interest groups was obtained from the Chamber of Commerce, and a representative from each group was interviewed.

The Formation of Local Advisory Committees

Local Advisory Committees were formed concurrent with the studies, for the following purposes:

1. To provide input from the audiences in the formative stages of the project, and
2. As a public relations tool to keep supporting agencies informed and informing.

The membership of the committees was determined by brainstorming with staff, architects, and exhibit designers. Many potential members were revealed during the visitor profile studies. Agencies that might have overlapping mandates, reasons to support the Centre, or be affected by the Centre's future programming were called and asked if they would be interested in electing a representative or being put on the mailing list. Representatives of the various resident target groups were obtained by asking around. Someone knew a former teacher who had brought her children to the facility every year, and now, as a grandmother, brought her grandchildren. Others spoke highly of the owner of a local fishing tackle store who sat on several related committees and was a long-time resident. The local seniors club was contacted, as was a community society for the disabled. These people were asked to act as representatives of the community.

The committees were large with over thirty people attending the initial meetings. During the first sessions, feedback was collected informally in the form of notes on paper or by representatives of the project team during refreshment time. Both committees were formed before exhibit designers had been contracted. At the first few meetings, the project was introduced, and the group entered into discussions about the possible role of a local advisory committee. The architect took the opportunity to present his plans for the new Visitors Centre at one of the early meetings.

Later, the larger committee was asked to elect representatives to a core committee that would:

- Assist in the evaluation of storyline and exhibit design proposals;
- Attend brainstorming sessions with the project team;
- Review designs and text;
- Act as ambassadors at an open house where the concept was presented to the larger LAC; and
- Assist with the grand opening of the display.

The Rewards of Participation

A facility that had once based its programs on general tours of the exhibits now offers programs developed for the facility and targeted to a variety of audiences. This is largely the result of contacts made during the formation of the LAC and the visitor studies. Exhibits prepared by professionals have been replaced by exhibits prepared by professionals with the input of LAC members. At the renovated Centre, LAC members were invited to walk through a mock display where descriptions of exhibits and text were painted and written on large sheets of paper and taped to the walls. This led to themes being switched between rooms because the order did not make sense to several LAC members. A life-size replica of a beaver dam was designed so that children could go inside and have underwater viewing of a large aquarium, as originally planned, but the plans were altered so that parents who expressed worries about their children's safety could watch the children through glass. These changes, and others like them, were relatively painless at the conceptual stage of the project.

The theater, for years left unused in the evenings, can now be booked by community groups with complementary mandates. The local fly-fishing club has moved its library to a room constructed for volunteers as part of the upgrade.

But perhaps the greatest reward has been the formation of the Fish in Need Society. Through F.I.N.S., staff members have an ongoing link with the community. The group has embarked on a large-scale project to turn several acres of the property on which the facility is located into a nature park. During the hard financial times that institutions of this type will continue to face, this group has provided access to grants that would not be available to a government agency. The Vancouver Island Trout Hatchery Visitor Centre LAC is still sorting out its role in the wake of government cutbacks which have cancelled the fabrication and installation of exhibits at their newly built and fully-designed Visitor Centre. The group is organizing a lobby and providing a voice for the community to oppose the cutbacks.

Even at the smallest facility where exhibits are integrated into the hatchery, the LAC has been instrumental in reawakening the institution's connection to its audiences. In a rural setting, members seem to have more time to contribute. During the development stage, members pored over the text and provided detailed comments. Some of the artifacts were obtained directly from LAC members or through local contacts which they provided. The exhibits now have a community feel, rather than that of government propaganda, yet the government messages are all still there.

A Few Hints

These experiences have left me with a few lessons about the successful operation of Local Advisory Committees. The committees should contain

lots of *regular* people, like children, mothers, and grandfathers who wouldn't usually sit on committees. These people can be unfamiliar with meeting formats and the exhibit design process. As a result, they may be shy, so they should outnumber the agency representatives on both the larger and core committees. These regular people provided wonderfully fresh insights on numerous occasions, so make an effort to make them feel comfortable. Do not expect everyone to speak out at the meetings, but give reserved people other opportunities to tell you what they think. *Listen, Listen, Listen.* Some ideas may seem crazy at first, but it may be that the team just does not understand them correctly, or they may be unconventional, but brilliant.

The development of a core group is absolutely necessary because the larger group is unmanageable. But core group members must constantly be reminded to check in with members of the larger committee to ensure that they are actually representing the entire group. It's important to inform all the members regularly, and to keep the process going. Delays can lead to a loss of interest.

The project team must be open to being evaluated by lay people. Someone on the team must know how to summarize qualitative feedback and be committed to meaningful audience involvement. Resist the temptation to offer to do something when no one else volunteers. Letting it sit until the next meeting or even allowing the meeting to go quiet will leave a door open for someone else to step through when they're ready. Offer to pay for meals, accommodation, and travel. These costs are minimal in relation to the overall cost of the project. Volunteer time is one thing, but real costs may limit some people's participation.

In Summary

Participation is what interpretive centers are all about. Participating in the ribbon-cutting ceremonies for those brand new shiny exhibits was a real thrill for me and for the Local Advisory Committee members who devoted so much of themselves to them. But, to tell the truth, the most rewarding part of the exhibit upgrade processes happened behind the scenes at an early F.I.N.S. meeting. The group was discussing a creek that ran through the property. Someone asked if everyone knew that a mall was proposed for an area across the street. The developers planned to create a culvert of an existing stream and place a parking lot over it. F.I.N.S. members were outraged. Didn't the developers know that the creek could be a highlight of the development? What about a walkway from a planned nature park through the development? A buffer strip could be left on either side of the creek, and viewing platforms and benches set aside. One member offered to approach the Abbotsford City Council on behalf of the group, and another said he knew the developer and would approach him informally. This was

true magic. It is what nature centers are all about, and it is why I will continue to find new ways for meaningful audience involvement.

References

- Andrusiak, E. (1991). *Vancouver Island Trout Hatchery Interpretive Centre visitor evaluation report*. Victoria, British Columbia: Economic Planning Group and Kanata Heritage Presentation Corporation.
- Underhill, D. (1991). Preliminary visitor evaluation report for the Fraser Valley Trout Hatchery. In *Fraser Valley Trout Hatchery Visitor Centre Report*. Calgary, Alberta: P.M.L. Exhibit Services Ltd..

Copies of these reports can be obtained by writing to:
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