Interim Guidance for Conducting Community-Based Planning Meetings During COVID-19

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This document provides interim guidance for applicants who will be conducting community-based planning meetings for competitive grant applications. **Due to COVID-19's impact on social gatherings, the California Department of Parks and Recreation (Department) is allowing for alternatives to in-person community-based planning meetings.**

Effectiveness of In-Person Meetings

No replacement, when designing a park, is as effective in building a stronger sense of community as in-person community-based planning meetings. In-person meetings are still recommended and encouraged for competitive grant applications. The next page provides guidance for in-person meetings. If there are local COVID-19 restrictions that do not allow for in-person meetings, **applicants should conduct virtual or remote meetings that will allow for safe community feedback.**

Meeting Alternatives

Alternatives such as phone conferences and video conferencing/webinars can still produce productive community input. However, webinars require high-speed internet, equipment, and technical training, which can be a technological barrier in communities affected by poverty. Other considerations for webinars include difficulty in controlling the background noise of callers, participants trying to speak at the same time, and translation needs for discussions. Preparing for a webinar can involve more planning and technical support staff than meeting with residents in person. This document provides things to consider.

Community Leadership

Whether applicants decide to hold in-person meetings, or conduct phone conferences and webinars, the Department encourages applicants to continue to lead with empathy. Ensuring a welcoming community engagement process during these unprecedented times is of utmost importance. Make the park design process inclusive, interactive, and fun for the project area's residents.

Meeting Charts

Due to COVID-19, the Department created charts on the following pages which provide guidance for community-based planning meetings.

Guidance for Facilitators

General Tips for In-Person Meetings

- **Health Guidelines:** Check local and state health guidelines for physical distancing and plan for how to address the guidelines for in-person meetings.
  - COVID.ca.gov website: covid19.ca.gov/safer-economy
  - CA Department of Public Health: cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Immunization/ncov2019.aspx
- **Conduct outdoor meetings** at or near the project site in an area that allows for physical distancing and fresh air.
- **Use an RSVP process** to keep meeting numbers within local and state public health COVID-19 guidelines for the number of participants per meeting.
- **Masks, hand sanitizer, and disinfecting wipes** should be provided.
- **Interactive Methods** are described in *Designing Parks Using Community Based Planning*.

Phone Conference and Video Conferencing/Webinar Platforms

The following are examples of platforms and tools. Remember, the purpose is for residents to work together to design the park with the applicant.

- Local telephone companies' teleconference lines
- Google Meet: meet.google.com
- Microsoft Teams: microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software
- Skype: skype.com/en
- Zoom: zoom.us
- Bluejeans: bluejeans.com
- Cisco Webex: webex.com
- GoToMeeting: gotomeeting.com
- Trendy Apps used by youth may include TikTok or Snapchat

Tools for Gathering Ideas During Webinars

These tools can be used to complement Video Conferencing/Webinars:

- Google Drawings
- Google Docs
- Sketchpad 5.1

Tools for Gathering Ideas During Webinars, Continued

- Polling, Chat box, and Hand raising – tools that are included in most video conferencing/webinar platforms
- Microsoft Visio
- Microsoft Murals
- Sketchboard

Preparation/Presentation Tips for Facilitators

The following discusses how facilitators can prepare themselves for webinars and phone conference meetings to obtain park design ideas from participants.

- **Internal plan:** There are many considerations about how to achieve design input goals with participants. Planning is key.
- **Staff Roles:** Assign staff to specific roles, including at least one presenter/facilitator, one staff to monitor questions, one staff for capturing the participants' ideas, and one support staff for technical issues. The public should have contact information for technical issues and troubleshooting. Ensure that all staff involved in the meeting understand their roles.
- **Meeting Protocols and Ground Rules:** Decide on procedures and rules for the meeting in advance. Consider instructions such as how participants can discuss ideas, how to capture ideas, muting and unmuting participants' phones, and dealing with background noises when they are unmuted.
- **Visual Aids:** Provide visuals such as colored maps and satellite photos showing the physical space of the project site to participants before the meeting. See the *Designing Parks Using Community Based Planning* resource for other ideas about visual tools.
- **Packets:** Mail out, deliver, or have participants pick up packets of important meeting materials such as platform quick reference notes, agenda about the park design input goals, site map, and any other information to assist with the design and planning prior to meetings.
- **Screen Access:** If phone conferencing is available, make sure participants who are not on the video conference/webinar have another way to access what is being shown on the screen. Without visuals and clear descriptors, participants on the phone may lose interest or feel discounted.
- **Interactive Tools:** Use an interactive resource for participants to create site plans (see video conference/webinar tools section). Consider how this can also be done during phone conferences.
- **Capturing Participants' Ideas:** Consider the best possible tools to capture ideas to help Participants see each other's ideas and add comments.

Preparation/Presentation Tips for Facilitators, Continued

- **Meeting Information:** Provide all necessary phone numbers, websites, pass codes, and passwords to participants who RSVP'd.
- **Language Level:** Use plain language that is understandable across multiple generations and translation resources. Speak slowly and articulate words clearly and distinctly to translate well to other languages.
- **Make it Fun:** If it is fun, participants will share with others, which may increase community engagement.
- **Gamify the Engagement:** Make it interactive. Test web-based platforms that allow for participants to work together to provide interactive park design ideas. The chat function or a poll may also be useful tools.
- **Agenda:** Develop an agenda that can be shared in advance, on screen during webinars, and on websites.
- **Presentation Rehearsal:** Practice using the chosen platform prior to the meeting and test the platform at least 30 minutes before the start of the video conference. Being comfortable using the platform is key.

Technical Assistance for Video Conferencing/Webinars

- **Internet Connection:** Consider the bandwidth/internet speed for each participant and speaker.
- **Browser:** Some browsers work better than others with webinar tools.
- **Platform Instructions:** Develop a short, first-time user tutorial or quick reference notes for the common tools on the platform. Direct participants to the video conference/webinar website for additional questions beyond the common tool tutorial or cheat sheet.
- **Platform Choice:** Choose a video conferencing platform that allows for the desired number of participants.
- **Written Instructions:** Ensure written instructions are clear for those who are unfamiliar with the tool.
- **Technical Support Contacts:** Participants and presenters should know how to contact someone for live technical support.
- **Call-in Alternatives:** Consider video conference/webinar solutions that allow participants to call in by phone if they do not have access to high-speed internet.

Technical Assistance for Video Conferencing/Webinars, Continued

- **Accounts/Application Downloads:** Notify participants if they will need to set up an account or download an application to access video conference/webinar features.
- **Wi-Fi Access Information:** Provide participants with information to access the internet as well as a map of Wi-Fi hotspots within the community. If this requires participants to be in a group, it may become an in-person meeting and COVID-19 precautions should be considered.

Outreach to Prepare Participants

- **Gathering Contacts:** Ask residents within the community to contribute contact information for potential webinar/phone conference participants.
- **Canvass:** Walk the community surrounding the park to post flyers and send mailers to invite residents.
- **Partnerships:** Partner with community leaders and organizations within the project area. Reach out to local health organizations, public health champions and promotoras, community-based organizations, and local schools that can assist with outreach efforts.
- **School Class:** Consider asking a local school's teacher to set this up as a class project for her/his students. Due to the pandemic, students may have access to school provided laptops and internet access.
- **Incentivize:** Provide incentives to participants to increase turnout. Make the incentives clear in the invitations.
- **Prepare Participants:** Reach out to participants early and send meeting materials ahead of time. Ensure that materials are available for residents who are non-English speaking.
- **Timing:** Choose times that allow the largest number of residents to participate (e.g. weekdays after 5pm and/or weekends).

Outreach Flyer

An outreach flyer should specify:

- Purpose of the meeting – design input.
- Meeting date(s) with start and end time(s).
- RSVP instructions to ensure that the meeting will not exceed the maximum number of participants.
- Directions on how residents can prepare in advance.

Help Participants Prepare

The following gives some ideas of what the participants should be told in advance to help prepare them for park design webinars and phone conferences.

- **Schedule:** Encourage participants to block the time in their schedules to be fully engaged in the meeting.
- **Family or Roommates:** Encourage participants to include their family members or roommates. In addition to discussing park design ideas together, someone in the home may be able to help with technological assistance.
- **Meeting Materials:** Encourage participants to review the goals, agenda, pictures/visuals, technical guidance, and other instructions before the meeting, and have the materials ready for the phone conference or webinar (make sure materials also identify the project site, and explain the design input process).

Guidance for Participants

Phone Conference Guidance

- **Login Confirmation:** Allow extra time for the login process to ensure that the phone number and passcode are correct for the call.
- **Platform Instructions:** Read instructions on how to use the functions of the platform, such as mute and unmute, prior to entering the phone conference.
- **Quiet Surroundings:** Call from a quiet place to minimize background noise when you are speaking or unmuted.

Video Conferencing/Webinar Guidance

- **Browser Compatibility:** Make sure that your browser meets the minimum compatibility requirements to run the platform successfully.
- **Internet Connection/Bandwidth:** Consider the speed of your computer connection (600 kbps minimum). If your computer does not meet the minimum requirements, contact the local agency that is facilitating the video conference for assistance.
- **Log In:** Ensure you have the correct username and password information.
- **Platform Tools:** Become familiar with all of the functions of the platform. Read instructions or view a short tutorial on how to ask questions, mute and unmute, raise your hand, turn your video on and off, and use other platform functions prior to entering the video conference.

Conclusion

Communities working together towards a common goal through park design remains important during these times. Although in-person meetings are the preferred method for community engagement, COVID-19 has temporarily challenged this traditional way of conducting meetings. This document has explained alternatives, including phone conferences and video conferences/webinars. However, it is important to reiterate that no replacement is as effective as in-person park design meetings for building strong and supportive community bonds. Effective group dynamics and engagement leads to interactive group discussions and in-depth understanding of a community's true needs. Parks designed with significant community input have higher usage, better protection, encourage a safe environment, and most importantly…thrive!