

Using Community Forums for Gathering Resident Inputs into Extension Program Direction

*Prepared by Lori Garkovich and Roger Rennekamp
Department of Community and Leadership Development*

1. Decide whether or not you plan to hold one public forum, or several throughout the community.
2. If you plan to conduct several, develop a list of all geographically distinct communities within the county. From your County Extension Council, identify a contact person from each area where you plan to hold a forum and ask for their help in identifying a "public space" that may serve as a site for a community forum. Ask if they would be willing to organize a forum in their area and/or be trained as the facilitator who would actually conduct the forum. If not, would they be willing to identify someone within the area who would be willing to fill either or both of these roles. Also identify a recorder or recorders for each session.
3. Determine the date, time, and place for each forum. Who will organize each forum? Who will facilitate? Will there be refreshments?
4. Develop promotional materials that will inform the public of what you are planning to do. Promotional methods may include a script for a public service radio announcement, a flyer announcing the event, posters, or newspaper articles or ads.
5. Have the forum coordinators develop a list of individuals to whom they feel a personal invitation to participate in the forum should be sent. The list may include county commissioners, business persons, teachers, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders, and others in formal leadership positions. But also make sure to invite citizens who are not "positional" leaders. Make sure to ensure participation by those who might be under-represented in Extension's council structure. Perhaps offer transportation.
6. Decide on a format to be used. One possibility is to keep the group together and ask a series of questions that those in attendance can respond to. Set a time limit for each person who chooses to respond. Another option is to have smaller groups rotate from "station" to "station" as they answer different questions posed by different moderators. A recorder is needed for each station. Still another option is to have participants seated at round tables all discuss the same question and report to the full group in round robin fashion.
7. Decide on the questions to be used. A list of potential questions can be found at: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/AgPSD/GroupQuestions.pdf>
8. Schedule training sessions for community forum moderators. Personally contact all those who have already expressed an interest in moderating.
9. Conduct training for moderators. Some hints for moderators can be found at: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/AgPSD/moderate.pdf>
10. Summarize data collected at forums, looking for key themes, trends, and commonalities.
11. Present findings of community forums to the County Extension Council.