

# Municipal Maryland

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## Hash it Out in Half the Time

By Pat Esslinger and Ellen Kandell

### A couple of nightmare scenarios – sound familiar?

**Scenario #1** - The Planning Commission is meeting to consider turning an abandoned warehouse into a high rise condominium with retail on the ground floor. The Mayor and the Chamber of Commerce support it; it's consistent with smart growth principles and the master plan for the municipality. Some long-time community residents in this mixed use area, which borders a rail line, don't want any more development in their neighborhood. Small business owners, including some light industrial users who were grandfathered in under the last revision to the existing zoning code fifteen years ago, support some development but fear reduction in the value of their land and business and restriction on future use of their property. You are being pressured because the process has already been very protracted and costly.

**Scenario #2** - You need decisions from your green initiatives task force now to apply for numerous programs with complex requirements and imminent deadlines. Within the task force, there is a divergence of views on which programs are a priority. Citizens want you to take advantage of the state incentive programs. Some advocate energy audits for all municipal buildings. The 1960s era building that houses your town offices may be eligible for some of the numerous loan programs for green building initiatives. You'd love to have a new modern office but are afraid to express these views in this economic climate. And only one city employee is staffing the task force.

In such common complex municipal government matters, if issues don't get resolved amicably, disappointed stakeholders could file a legal challenge or otherwise delay a resolution, which could devastate your budget.

### Get some help from a facilitator trained to use collaborative meeting technology

You would probably turn to facilitation, a type of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) in which a neutral third party designs and manages a decision-making process. But such processes often take a lot of time. The kinds of decisions these two scenarios involve frequently take place in public meetings, and sometimes people are hesitant to speak out —

especially if they are in a public position. Collaborative meeting technology may be used to speed up the process and elevate the quality of participation. Long used in planning and decision-making meetings, this high-tech approach uses a computer for each member of the group. One-at-a-time, sequential, oral comments, and facilitators' flip charts are largely replaced by simultaneously typed anonymous comments and electronic "big screen" displays.

### One scenario for how this technology-enabled process can work

- 1 Identify all interests to define issues clearly:** Participants individually type in their interests. Everybody can see what everybody else has listed and can comment on those ideas, but nobody knows whose item is whose.





**2 Brainstorm possibilities and opportunities to explore options:** Technology-wise, this step is similar to the first one. The speed gained through simultaneous input and the anonymity encourage creative suggestions. Facilitated oral discussion of the brainstorming results works to clarify ideas and eliminate redundancy. (This is like using markers and flip charts — except much faster, with a better format and legibility, and an editable record.) Either individually or through facilitated group discussion, the possibilities can be sorted to form options.

**3 Establish mutually-agreed upon standards to assess the options:** Participants propose standards and individually indicate the extent of their agreement with each proposal. The software quickly calculates the group results and presents statistical information. Areas of disagreement are discussed and resolved. Participants then rate each option against each standard and immediately see numerical and graphical results on screen.

**4 Achieve consensus:** In the assessment of options, degree of consensus on the ratings is calculated and highlighted. Options are sorted by score so that the “best” options top the charts and the parties can clearly see the options around which they can build consensus. Reasons for disagreement among the participants are probed through anonymous input as well as group discussion. Key problems are identified. Revised proposals are suggested and assessed. The cycle can be repeated quickly and efficiently until true consensus is reached.

#### Why this approach is successful

⇒ Because input is anonymous, ideas are judged on their own merit rather than being identified with particular parties and their known positions.

- ⇒ Disagreements and critical remarks focus on content, not personalities.
- ⇒ The intermingling of responses promotes understanding, identifies key interests, and makes the similarity of interests among the parties apparent.
- ⇒ Simultaneous input by all participants generates a large number of options/solutions that can be considered, while the polling function of the technology makes it quick and easy to reduce those options to the ones most favored by the whole group.
- ⇒ The whole process is speeded up, getting to resolution sooner and using less time in meetings.
- ⇒ The simultaneous input and individual voting empowers participants and gives all of them a greater sense of satisfaction with and ownership of the result.
- ⇒ By reinforcing the focus of the process on issues rather than on parties, collaborative meeting technology has a positive effect on the ongoing relationships of the parties.

Can you afford to let decision making processes go unmanaged? For smaller groups and issues you may only need a skilled neutral facilitator for a couple of meetings; however, for complex issues with multiple interests collaborative meeting technology will produce better results in less time. ■



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