

Decision-Making on Controversial Issues of National Scope: Models for Involving the Public

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This paper reports on a study of public participation models that could be used to address public participation needs for controversial issues of national scope. This paper begins by describing the conceptual framework used to develop four unique models, and the assumptions made in developing the models. Each model is then briefly described and compared with the other models.

Basis for the Models

Just as every well-planned public participation program begins with identifying objectives for what the program is intended to achieve, the process used to develop the 4 models discussed in this paper began by considering the objectives that they might be relevant. Thus, to be included as a viable model, each model had to meet several criteria. First, it had to be capable of achieving the following public participation objectives:

- To consult the public in a comprehensive manner, such that the process:
 - Is understandable and accessible
 - Involves the broadest range of stakeholders and members of the public at the earliest opportunity
 - Is open and transparent about how decisions are made
 - Provides sufficient time for deliberation of issues
- To foster awareness of the issue being decided,
- To develop and sustain trust and confidence in the sponsoring organization/ agency
- To develop informed acceptance of options

In addition to meeting objectives for public participation, each model needed to allow active interaction between the proponent and participants. It also needed to have a reasonable chance of being successful. As a result the model “decide-announce-defend” was eliminated because it is unlikely that this model would be successful.

¹ We would like to thank Dave Hardy and Dave Shulman for their insight and contribution to this work. We also appreciate the wisdom and suggestions of our colleagues who attended our presentation at the IAP2 meeting in Salt Lake City.

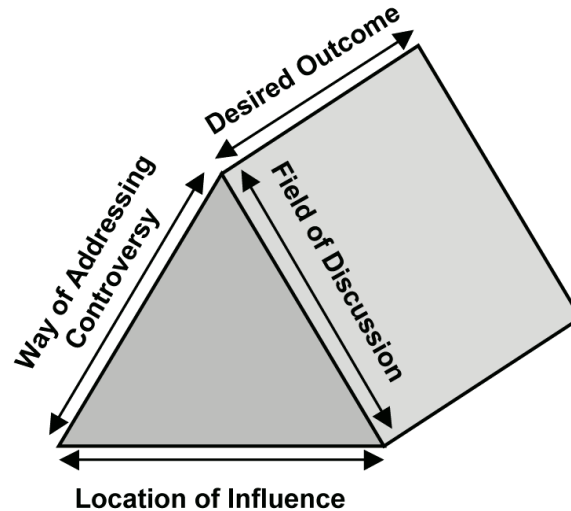
The models were expected to be used in any number of stages of a participatory process. These stages ranged from identifying stakeholders and planning the participation process to generating options and achieving dialogue to involving decision makers.

The models also needed to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate a range of possibilities. Thus, each model had to be workable with widely varying stakeholders, and accommodate a wide range of public participation tools (such as brochures, meetings, interactive television, etc.)

Finally, the model had to be (relatively) distinct. To meet this criterion, we examined factors or dimensions that tend to distinguish different ways of interacting with the public, and identified unique models along these dimensions. The following four major dimensions guided the development of the public participation models:

- Location of influence, defined as the relative power of the publics and the proponents in decision making;
- Desired outcome, defined as the results sought from the public processes;
- Field of discussion, defined as how open or closed the discussion is about problems and/or solutions, and;
- Ways of addressing controversy, defined as whether controversy is explicitly acknowledged and addressed or whether it is dealt with more indirectly.

Figure 1: Dimensions of Public Participation

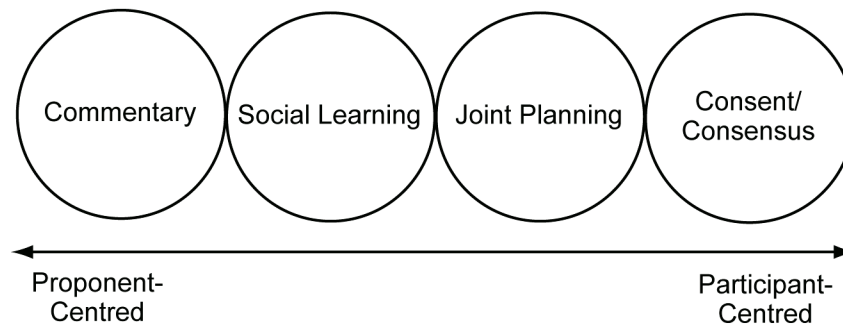


We combined these four dimensions in a multi-dimensional framework to develop the public participation models (Figure 1). Each model was distinguished from the other models by a unique location on at least one of the four dimensions. The primary dimension used in developing the models was “location of influence”. This dimension is commonly used in the literature to distinguish among approaches to public participation (International Association for Public Participation, 2001; Bacow and Wheeler, 1984; Creighton, 1981; Crowfoot and Wondolleck, 1990; Goldfarb, 1991; World Bank, 1995). Based on the objectives and framework, we arrived at the following four models:

- (1) Commentary Model
- (2) Social Learning Model
- (3) Joint Planning Model
- (4) Consent / Consensus Model

These models fall into three categories along the dimension of “level of influence”: proponent-centred, intermediary-centred, and participant-centred (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Four Models of Public Participation



Description of the Models

Each model is briefly described below. It is then compared and contrasted with all other models.

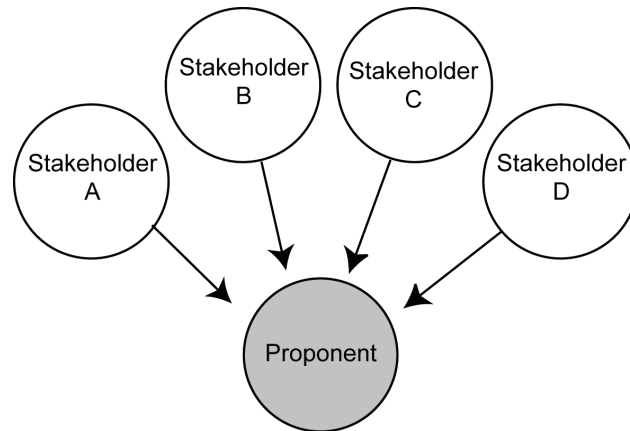
Commentary Model

The Commentary Model is widely used as a standard public participation approach across Canada for all levels of government and in instances where privately held companies require public comments. Under this model, the proponent maintains the ultimate authority to make a decision. It is assumed that staff within the proponent’s organization possesses high levels of expertise that to recommend (a range of) acceptable solutions. Members of the general public and key stakeholders are provided an opportunity to comment on decisions that the proponent will make. The proponent may ask the public to weigh and rank criteria leading to a preferred recommendation. The public is encouraged to be involved by learning about the problems being addressed, the options available to solve the problems, and the recommended solution. Decisions at each stage must be left open before the public is asked to comment; otherwise, the public may view the process as lacking integrity.

A potential diagram of how participants interact in the Commentary Model is found in Figure 3. It is characterized by participation of perhaps the widest types of stakeholders, yet information is not widely available or shared. Participants do not actively generate solutions, nor is there any

attempt to build relationships among participants. As a result, participants require little familiarity with public participation techniques and other process skills. Parties are involved at distinct times, according to a schedule that the proponent puts forward.

Figure 3: Relationships in the Commentary Model

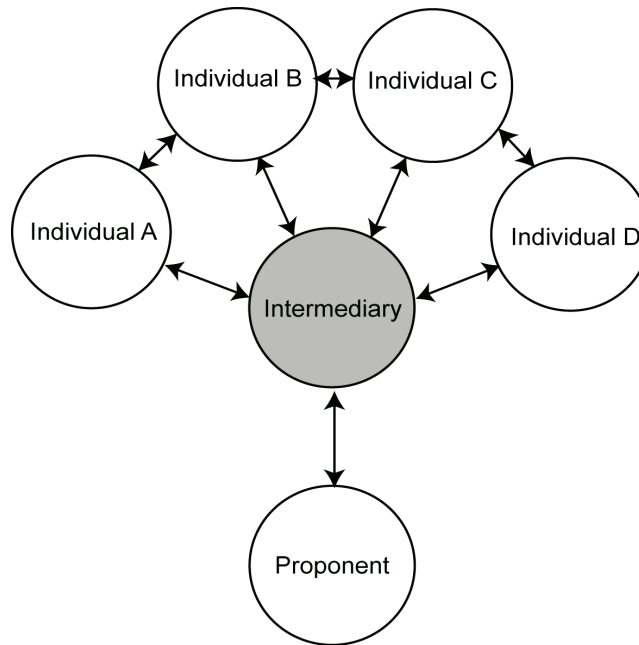


Social Learning Model

Social Learning is a way for a proponent and citizens to interact when the objective is to hear from citizens about key issues. It is used to inform the policy and decision making process based on citizen perspectives and values. The model is structured so that emphasis is placed on finding the creative synthesis of a number of perspectives, rather than making a choice between them. Thus it reflects the very real complexities that organizations face in policy decisions. Members of the public come to understand these complexities. There are no "right" and "wrong" answers; instead the process respects all perspectives as it allows common ground to emerge.

A possible diagram of the interaction patterns of the social learning model is found in Figure 4. Civic-minded community members, with experience in small group participation are the typical participants in this model. Like the Commentary Model, those who participate in a Social Learning Model do so according to a pre-defined schedule that the proponent oversees. Participants receive technical information that has been translated into material for educated lay audiences, but they are not active in generating solutions. A side benefit of participation in the Social Learning Model is that participants frequently end up building relationships with one another. Furthermore, because they have a fuller understanding of the complexities related to the issue, they may be more supportive of the proponent's decisions.

Figure 4: Relationships in the Social Learning Model

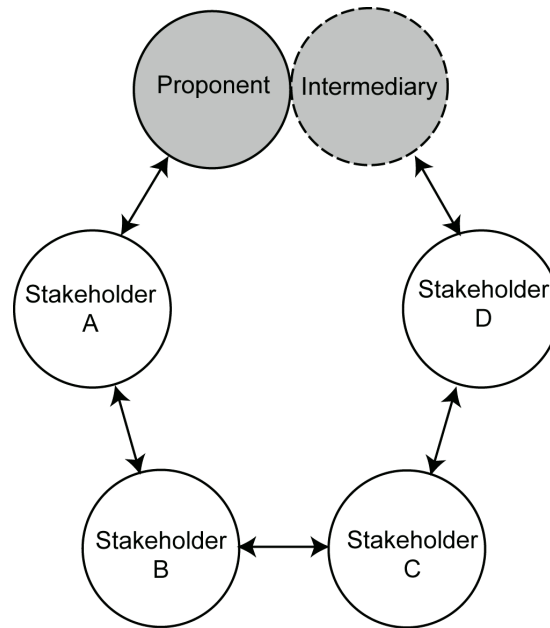


Joint Planning Model

Joint Planning is the first model that expects the public to act at least as equal partners with the proponent. Joint Planning processes are based on a public participation philosophy that acknowledges the skills and experience which participants can bring to a process. It is a citizen-focused approach that encourages in-depth deliberation about the issue, and may include discussions regarding values and principles. From the proponent's perspective, it requires placing faith in the skills and abilities of Canadians to come up with a recommendation. It also requires that participants enter the dialogue in good faith, be respectful of each other, and be open to finding solutions that previously may not have existed, but could result from the collective wisdom of all participants.

In this model, participants tend to be decision makers who represent an organization or particular interest group (Figure 5). To participate effectively, these parties require considerable knowledge of how to participate – i.e., knowledge of group dynamics, ways to foster respect and so forth. A third party *may* convene this process, and the schedules are set to be mutually agreeable to all participants. Moreover, information is widely and openly shared, and participants get involved as the problem is being defined. As the process unfolds, participants actively create potential recommendations, with the intent to produce solutions that all parties can live with.

Figure 5: Relationships in the Joint Planning Model

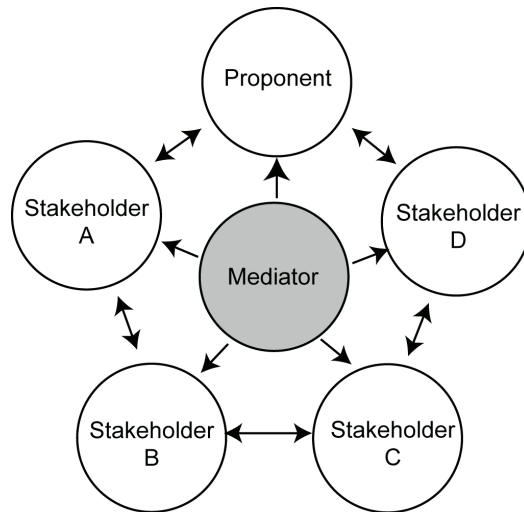


Consent Model

The Consent Model is a participant-centred approach to public participation that grants the most decision making responsibility to participants. It is used in circumstances where it is necessary not only to obtain and retain the involvement of key stakeholders, but also to obtain their approval of the terms of their participation.

The Consent Model assumes that people being asked to be involved have the power to say no based on existing protocols, relationships, legislation, legal status, or moral authority. For example, First Nations, Canada's faith groups, or local municipalities who have a history of negative experiences with public participation processes may not be interested in participating. Furthermore, it acknowledges that some participants have authority to influence either decisions of the proponent or veto power. Some Federal Departments, Provincial Governments, or international interests may exercise this power. Thus, people who are essential participants will need to give their 'consent' to being involved.

Figure 6: Relationships in the Consent/Consensus Model



Review of the Models

Each model represents a different approach to working with the public (Table 1). These differences are perhaps most evident when one examines where the power resides – that is the *location of influence*. In the Commentary and Social Learning Models, the proponent clearly retains all power to decide the course of events. At other end of the spectrum, in the Consent Model, citizens ultimately decide how the participation process will unfold. With this model in particular, participants have veto power over whether or not they participate.

Differences in conceptual approaches are further reflected with respect to the *desired outcome* for each model. As one moves from a proponent-centred model, such as Commentary, to a participant-centred model, such as Consent, the outcome moves from a passive acceptance to full consensus and agreement coupled with active, informed acceptance.

In addition to variability about where the power to decide ultimately rests, the models reflect differences in how open the discussion is – that is, *the field of discussion*. In both the Commentary and Social Learning Models, the discussion is quite closed – participants are not generating or creating potential solutions. A more open discussion is found in both the Joint Planning and Consent Models – the agenda is less defined, and participants actively engage in creating potential solutions that are technically and scientifically sound, and that they can agree with. Furthermore, because participants are creating recommendations, new solutions often emerge that reflect the collective wisdom and synergy of all participants’ contributions.

Finally, the models vary on how they acknowledge *controversy and conflict*. At one end of the continuum, proponents following the Commentary Models do not generally alter the public participation process to resolve conflict or controversy. Instead, the focus is on making a

recommendation, even if controversy may be apparent. In contrast, Social Learning expects, and in some cases even establishes, forums for citizens' values and potential controversies to surface.

In the Joint Planning and Consent Models, every effort is made to bring any conflict or controversy to the surface and directly address underlying issues. For these models, the focus is on identifying and resolving controversy to allow all parties to continue to be part of the process.

Table 1: Summary of the Models

	<i>Proponent-centred</i>	<i>Intermediary-centred</i>		<i>Participant-centred</i>
Conceptual dimensions	<i>Commentary</i>	<i>Social learning</i>	<i>Joint planning</i>	<i>Consent/Consensus</i>
Location of influence	Decision rests with proponent	Decision rests with proponent, participants engage in debate	Decision shared among proponent and participants	Ultimately, citizens decide upon recommended solution
Field of discussion	Generally closed Participation process may be somewhat open to allow mid course changes in approach	Distinct alternatives advanced	Open	Open
How controversy addressed	Usually can only accommodate a low level of controversy	Variable to medium Acknowledges controversy if it exists, but no focus on resolution of conflict	Can accommodate medium to high levels of controversy	Process designed to deal with any range of controversy
Desired outcome	Passive acceptance of recommendations	Increased public awareness and recognition of complexity of recommendations	At least partial consensus Creation of alternative recommendations that reflects a synthesis of all parties' contributions	Full consensus and consent Active acceptance

Comparisons among models

While each model has its unique characteristics based on the conceptual framework, there are similarities as well. We compared the four models based on the following operational factors:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Factors related to participants and how information is used;
- Factors related to the management of the process and knowledge needed for the process to run well;
- Factors related to how the participants engage in the process and group dynamics, and;
- Logistical factors.

These comparisons are summarized below (please see the end of the document for each of the following tables).

Roles and responsibilities

The participants, the proponent, and potentially an external non-partial party all have responsibilities which may vary across the models. Table 2 shows these variations.

Participants and Information

Each model is targeted at involving different types of participants. The models also differ based on the information that needs to be available, and the depth of public disclosure required by the proponent completing the study. Four criteria are used to compare participants and information regarding each model (Table 3).

Management Requirements and Knowledge Needed for the Process to Run Smoothly

The design of most public participation processes involves questions of *'who's going to manage the process?'* and *'what do we, as a proponent, need to know to make the process run well?'* Often this is called public participation 'process management' and 'process knowledge'. Again, each model places differing demands on management and knowledge. Table 4 summarizes the two criteria used to compare process knowledge and process management.

Power Dynamics and Outcomes

Some participants who participate in the public participation process may have considerable power to influence recommendations. Some models have the potential to create a higher level of public support for a recommendation, albeit potentially associated with a high time commitment or financial cost. Table 5 compares and contrasts the four models in terms of power, and offers some potential suggestions about what this may mean for supporting a specific model.

Logistics

Even the most exciting public participation process must address the mundane issues of organization, scheduling, and logistics. The person who develops work plans based on the model(s) must think through when the input of stakeholders and the public is being requested, how much the process will cost and how the information from the public will be noted and brought into the decision-making process. How each model relates to logistical concerns is summarized in Table 6.

Practitioners' Views of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Each Model

As Tables 3-6 show, each model has advantages and disadvantages. These strengths and weaknesses were further confirmed by public participation practitioners around the world. Table 7 presents strengths and weaknesses of each model according to over 30 public participation practitioners who attended the workshop at the 2002 conference of the International Association for Public Participation.

Summary

Eliciting input from the public on controversial issues is a never simple, as numerous failed public participation processes demonstrate. Indeed considering the most appropriate approach(es) at the beginning of a decision process, given the circumstances, may contribute to success. The models presented here explicitly show the range of major philosophical approaches used to involve the public in decision-making. Each model offers possibilities for credible and acceptable decision making processes that address the challenge of successful public involvement.

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Table 2: Comparison of Four Models Regarding Roles and Responsibilities

Roles and Responsibilities	<i>Commentary</i>	<i>Social Learning</i>	<i>Joint Planning</i>	<i>Consent/ Consensus</i>
Proponent	<p>Leads development of proposed approaches</p> <p>Decides who will be consulted and how</p> <p>Offers extensive expertise</p> <p>Has final say in all decisions</p>	<p>Prepares budget and schedule</p>	<p>Identifies stakeholders (sometimes w/ third party)</p>	<p>Identifies stake-holders who have veto power</p> <p>Creates conditions satisfactory to participants before and throughout process</p>
Public	<p>May weigh/ rank factors</p> <p>Offers comments primarily on recommendations</p> <p>Is assumed to defer to experts</p>	<p>Engages in dialogue to understand issues</p> <p>May weigh/ rank factors to support comparisons and choices</p>	<p>Works with proponent to identify issues, arrive at decision</p> <p>Must have authority to decide on behalf of their group</p>	<p>Participants can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stop the process completely ▪ Perform independent review of options ▪ Support a peer review as condition of participation
Third party	<p>Rarely used</p>	<p>In conjunction w/ proponent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Decides who will be consulted and how ▪ Draws on various perspectives to develop discussion materials 	<p>Facilitates discussion amongst parties</p> <p>Sometimes, manages technical aspects</p> <p>Coordinates information sharing among participants</p>	<p>Deals w/ disagreement to achieve consensus</p>

Table 3: Comparison Of Four Models Regarding Participants and Information

Dimension	<i>Commentary</i>	<i>Social Learning</i>	<i>Joint Planning</i>	<i>Consent/ Consensus</i>
Typical participants (who is involved)	Wide range, from highly knowledgeable professionals, to active, “general” public	Geared to active citizens who typically participate as individuals Interest groups may or may not be involved Doesn’t work well for Governmental and institutional participants	Decision makers of key organizations with interests and positions related to the issue	Decision makers of key organizations with interests and positions related to the issue Not easy to get consensus from general public
Role of information (how data are used, and who uses data and information)	Technical information is available, but not necessarily easily accessible	Specific information related to discussion of proposed alternatives is provided	Joint fact-finding encouraged (“my information is your information”)	All forms of data – scientific, experiential, traditional wisdom; quantitative and qualitative – are valued and are part of the dialogue
Level of disclosure of information (how much information is disclosed and how is it disclosed)	Only data that proponent sees as most relevant is released	Technical information translated into lay terms for educated lay audiences	High disclosure by all members engaging in dialogue	High disclosure, with joint fact-finding encouraged
Knowledge of civics, group process, etc. participants need to participate (skills needed to participate fully)	Typically participants comment through letters, structured meetings – they do not necessarily need skills in group participation, etc. Skills in public speaking often desirable	Participants may get background reading material before participating in dialogue Tips on working in groups could be included Skills in group participation are important	Requires considerable understanding of group dynamics, interaction with others, giving positive feedback, etc.	Requires considerable understanding of group dynamics, interaction with others, giving positive feedback, etc.

Table 4: Comparisons Regarding Management and Knowledge Of Public Consultation

Operational dimensions	<i>Commentary</i>	<i>Social Learning</i>	<i>Joint Planning</i>	<i>Consent/ Consensus</i>
Who manages the process (who or what organization(s) keeps the consultation process moving forward and on track)	Proponent	Third party	Proponent or third party	Proponent and all participants equally, with assistance of third party
Knowledge required of proponent (skills in public participation, knowledge of effective tools to deliver the program, and familiarity with troubleshooting skills, etc.)	Should understand and be able to apply strengths of weaknesses of different consultation tools (e.g., meetings, brochures, etc.) Should be able to translate technical information into lay terms	Should be able to translate technical information into lay terms Should understand fundamentals of facilitation and group participation activities	Requires general understanding and support of techniques of facilitation and conflict management to work effectively with outsourced third party Requires considerable understanding of group dynamics, interaction with others, giving positive feedback, etc. to work as a collaborative partner	Requires general understanding and support of techniques of facilitation and conflict management to work effectively with outsourced third party Requires considerable understanding of group dynamics, interaction with others, giving positive feedback, etc. to work as a collaborative partner

Table 5: Comparisons Regarding Power Dynamics And Outcomes

Operational dimensions	<i>Commentary</i>	<i>Social Learning</i>	<i>Joint planning</i>	<i>Consent/ Consensus</i>
Addresses unequal bargaining power (different abilities of each model to allocate appropriate weight for the opinions of under-represented groups)	Each party participates independently of others, so no attempt to change power differentials	Important to seek out under-represented individuals, not just active, civic-minded individuals, to ensure wide-spread understanding	All parties (with proponent as one) treated as equivalent Special effort to bring in and support under-represented groups to ensure comprehensive solutions	All parties (with proponent as one) treated as equivalent Special effort to bring in and support under-represented groups to ensure comprehensive solutions
Degree to which participants generate solutions (extent participants create and potential solutions that are actually used)	Participants comment on recommended solution, or potentially on alternatives	Participants react to distinct alternatives to understand complexity; they do not actively generate more alternatives	Participants actively create new, potential solutions, which reflect wisdom of all participants	Participants actively create new, potential solutions, which reflect synthetic wisdom of all participants
Relationships built among participants (including proponent) (what happens among participants (including the proponent) as they participate)	Minimally	Substantially	Possible, and likely	Possible, and likely Interaction among stakeholders is characterized by peer discussions
Potential for support (stakeholder support for decisions, even if disagree)	Proponent will decide, informed by public input Participants do not create potential solutions, so may be less committed to outcome	Participants provide feedback on distinct options Through understanding they would not block the proponent's decision	Participants will likely decide (and possibly agree) about certain components of the problem, but may not reach full consensus Participants active in creating solutions are generally supportive of what they help create	Participants are striving to achieve full consensus with the assistance of a mediator Participants active in creating solutions are generally supportive of what they help create

Table 6: Comparisons Regarding Logistics

Operational dimensions	<i>Commentary</i>	<i>Social learning</i>	<i>Joint Planning</i>	<i>Consent/ Consensus</i>
When stakeholders participate (timing and duration of participation)	Early in the consultation to lend credibility to the decision making process	Early in the consultation to lend credibility to the decision making process	Often in problem formulation stage	Once participants give consent to begin process
Adherence to schedule (who defines schedule, inherent pressure posed by the model for sticking w/ schedule, whether schedule is established <i>a priori</i>)	Schedule defined by proponent Often risk of schedule being too demanding	Schedule defined by proponent	Schedule fluid and jointly defined with all participants	Schedule fluid and jointly defined with all participants Time required for negotiation and mediation
Honoraria/ fees (honoraria, fees, and facility costs)	Fees include potential travel costs, facility rental	Fees include facilitators, facility rentals, materials, etc.	Honoraria for experts may be necessary Fees may include facilitators	Honoraria for experts may be necessary Travel costs for mediation
Documentation requirements and options	Minutes are generated for meetings; written materials submitted become part of official records	Notes, or meeting minutes to capture participants' comments and concerns	Notes (often on flip-charts), or meeting minutes to capture participants' comments and concerns Transcripts not typically used	Notes (often on flip-charts), or meeting minutes to capture participants' comments and concerns Accuracy of minutes will be an issue of concern Transcripts not typically used

Table 7: Strengths and Weaknesses of Each Model According to Public Participation Practitioners

Models	Strengths	Weaknesses
<i>Commentary Model</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple to use • Quick start • Straightforward • Relatively cheap • Can be used anywhere and in a variety of situations • Clear roles and rules • More people are involved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited long-term benefits from using process • Can limit stakeholders because lacking creative interaction • No trust building, relationship building • Not much value added • Not necessarily reach diverse stakeholders/ audiences (e.g., culturally inadequate) • Limited opportunity for capacity building • No interactive learning
<i>Social Learning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful in early stages of a project • Beneficial when decision-making process is still open • Can achieve shared understanding • Useful in developing alternatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produces expectations, if not clear about how using information • Potential to ruin rest of process • Could shut down process if practitioners underestimate amount of controversy • Could take a long time • Expensive • Careful preparation required
<i>Joint Planning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could work well with large numbers if part of larger process and well structured • Flexible time line • Higher level of acceptance • Contribute expertise • Process itself is positive, not just the decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs commitment to join and stay with process • Need certain knowledge, prepared in advance • Needs a time frame, otherwise may be extend indefinitely
<i>Consent / Consensus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes ownership, support • Can improve relationships at table • Shared power • Potential for better solution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limits participation • Need commitment • Time consuming – in process, in capacity building • Could blow up