

Public Meetings Are Like Family Dinners - Why Public Forums Serve Communities Better Than Round-Robin Meetings

Imagine this: It's Sunday dinner at Grandma's house. Everyone's gathered around the table, passing the gravy and swapping stories. Uncle Bob is talking about the big buck he saw last week, Aunt Sue is griping about her garden pests, and the kids are trying to one-up each other with tall tales from school. Sure, it gets a little rowdy, but everyone hears the same stories, and by the end of the meal, everyone's on the same page—more or less.

Now, picture this instead: Everyone gets called into the kitchen one by one. Grandma tells you one version of her pie recipe, then whispers a different version to Uncle Bob, and by the time Aunt Sue's done in the kitchen, nobody's sure what's in the pie—or if Grandma even made it. The whole family is confused and frustrated, and next Sunday, half of them don't even show up.

This is the difference between a **public forum** and a **round-robin meeting** when it comes to community engagement in renewable energy projects. Public forums are like that big family dinner—everyone gets the same story and can talk it through together. Round-robin meetings? They're like playing a game of telephone with life-changing decisions on the line.



Public Forums: Everyone at the Table

A public forum is exactly what it sounds like: a big meeting where the developer (the host) talks to everyone at once. It's open, it's clear, and it ensures that no one leaves feeling left out. Here's why public forums work, especially for farmers and rural communities who deserve straightforward answers:

1. Everyone Gets the Same Story

Let's face it: When it comes to big decisions, consistency is key. A public forum ensures that everyone hears the same answers to the same questions.

For example, if someone asks, "*How close will these turbines be to my property line?*" the developer's answer isn't just for that one person—it's for the whole community. This way, everyone can discuss what they heard and decide whether it makes sense. It's like Grandma announcing at the table, "*No, you cannot have my pie recipe. It's going to the grave with me!*" At least now the whole family knows where things stand.

2. Transparency Builds Trust

Public forums make it harder for developers to dodge tough questions. When someone asks, "*How will this solar farm affect my drainage?*" the developer has to answer in front of everyone. If the answer sounds fishy, the whole room will notice, and someone else can press for clarification.

It's like Uncle Bob asking at dinner, "*Are we sure this pie isn't store-bought?*" If Grandma's dodging eye contact and changing the subject, you know something's up. Transparency keeps everyone honest.

3. Community Collaboration

In a public forum, you hear what's on your neighbors' minds. Maybe Sally's worried about how construction will impact her cattle, and Joe's concerned about how it might affect his hunting land. When everyone's in the same room, these concerns come together, helping the community build a shared understanding and stronger voice.

It's like Aunt Sue asking Grandma, "*How does your pie crust get so flaky?*" and everyone chimes in with their two cents. Sure, there's some back-and-forth, but by the end, the whole family's on the same page—even if they're still pie-less.

Round-Robin Meetings: The Kitchen Shuffle

Now let's talk about round-robin meetings. These are more like having each family member shuffle into the kitchen for a private chat with Grandma. While it might seem more personal, it creates a mess of confusion and frustration.

1. Mixed Messages

In a round-robin meeting, different developer reps often give different answers to the same question. One might say, "*Don't worry, the turbines are quieter than a whisper,*" while another admits, "*Well, you might hear a faint hum, but it's nothing compared to a tractor.*" By the end of the meeting, no one knows what to believe.

This is like Grandma telling one grandkid she uses lard for the crust, another that it's butter, and a third that it's a store-bought mix (*heaven forbid*). Nobody gets the same answer, and everyone leaves feeling duped.

2. Isolation Kills Collaboration

Round-robin meetings keep neighbors apart. You don't hear what questions others are asking, and you miss out on their concerns. That means the whole community loses its chance to learn, share, and build a united front.

It's like Uncle Bob not hearing Aunt Sue complain about her burnt casserole because they're in different rooms. The family dinner vibe is lost, and so is the chance to work things out together.

3. Trust Erodes Quickly

If you're hearing one thing and your neighbor's hearing another, it's only natural to feel suspicious. Round-robin meetings often come across as secretive and manipulative, leaving communities to wonder if the developer is hiding something.

It's like Grandma saying, "*Just trust me,*" while locking the recipe book in a safe. You'd probably start questioning what's really going on.

Why Developers Prefer Round-Robin Meetings (Spoiler: It's Not for You)

If round-robin meetings are so bad for communities, why do developers keep using them? Well, it's not because they're trying to help.

According to a study by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, most developers don't want communities to have real power in decision-making. The study found:

“When directly asked about their opinion of the most appropriate way to engage members of the public in decisions about project siting, over three-quarters of both wind and solar respondents indicated the public should provide input. No respondents indicated that the public should make decisions, and only 6% of solar and 8% of wind developers selected that the public should recommend decisions.”

This shows that **developers overwhelmingly prefer engagement to be a one-way street**: they listen to the community’s input, but they have no intention of letting that input influence key decisions. Round-robin meetings make this easier by keeping conversations fragmented and limiting opportunities for collective action.

So, What’s the Solution?

You don’t have to settle for being shuffled into the “round-robin kitchen.” Here’s how your community can push for a public forum instead:

1. Organize as a Community

Developers can ignore one person, but they can’t ignore an organized group. Form a community coalition and demand transparency together. Write petitions, attend meetings as a group, and show developers that your community is united in wanting a public forum.

2. Do Your Homework

Learn about the developer’s track record. If they’ve held public forums in other communities, ask why they aren’t doing it here. Show that your community is informed and ready for meaningful dialogue.

3. Involve Local Leaders

Work with elected officials and local organizations to advocate for a public forum. Developers want to stay in good standing with local governments, so getting your township trustees or county commissioners on board can make a big difference.

4. Call Out Their Claims

If the developer says they’re committed to public input, hold them to it. Remind them that a public forum is the best way to ensure transparency and trust. If they refuse, ask why they’re afraid of open dialogue.

5. Leverage Public Pressure

Use social media, letters to the editor, and local events to rally your community and put the spotlight on the developer's unwillingness to engage openly.

Final Thought: Demand a Seat at the Table

Your land, your community, and your voice matter. Don't let developers treat public engagement like a formality or a checkbox on their to-do list. Push for a public forum, where everyone can hear the same answers, ask their questions, and work together to protect what's theirs.

Because in the end, if they're serious about being a "*good neighbor*," they should have no problem joining the family dinner—and answering to the whole table.

References: [Nilson, R., Rand, J., Hoen, B., & Elmallah, S. \(2024\). *Public Engagement in Renewable Energy Siting: Insights from Industry Professionals*. Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.](#)