

Public participation: THE BENEFITS OF CONSULTING



Ruth Marr, President of Marr Consulting Services

The October AMM Education Workshop focused on Public Engagement and Participation. **Ruth Marr**, President of Marr Consulting Services, led the session. Ruth has been recognized for her abilities in public consultation and in designing processes that facilitate clear decision-making on complex subjects. Using examples from her business experience, Ruth presented on understanding public engagement and participation and the roles, processes and techniques involved. Ruth offered first-hand and practical experience in the planning, designing, coordination, and material preparation for consultations and workshops. She frequently works in rural Manitoba, as well as Winnipeg and other provinces, and clearly understands community consultation processes and rural realities.

In the workshop, Ruth provided an overview of consulting techniques and offered suggestions on when to use which type. Vocabulary was the first topic: what is the difference between consultation, communication, participation, facilitation and engagement? (Answer: it varies with the degree to which participants are involved and contribute, vs. receive information). The most effective processes have clarity of objectives. It is important to know why you want to give or receive information, comments, ideas and feedback, and also what you will do with the answers that you receive. In some situations, a one-way flow of information out to the public or key stakeholders is quite appropriate: just don't call it consultation! By knowing in advance how you will use the information, you can manage expectations, plan an appropriate format, and potential participants can more effectively decide if they wish to get involved or not. You can consult to test a concept, to gather pertinent information that may inform the details of a design or plan, or more rarely, to involve stakeholders in decision-making.

Ruth discussed different participation and engagement techniques. The inten-

tion was not to provide training in how to lead a vision session or organize an open house, but rather to highlight key methodologies, their pros and cons, implications (especially costs in terms of materials but also time) and when each is most appropriate. In addition to more traditional approaches, Ruth touched on the use of social media, the web and other innovative ideas such as "Open Space." Ruth has a strong practical inclination, however, and believes that cutting edge ideas, while interesting, are not always the best approach. One of her favourite quotes is, "Consult broadly – then do the right thing." Expect to sit back, be engaged, and

learn the language of consultation.

As the President of Marr Consulting Services and founder of Randonnée Tours, Ruth brings knowledge and passion to consulting assignments. A M.Sc. in Plant Ecology was the impetus for an initial career in environmental consulting. Now with close to 20 years of consulting experience, Ruth has an excellent record of project management in environmental studies, public consultation, active transportation, and in sustainable tourism. Ruth also has a strong reputation for her ability to understand the big picture, and to provide strategic planning advice using effective communication skills. ■

Serving municipal councils who serve Manitobans

Manitoba Intergovernmental Affairs works in partnership with municipal councils to assist you in building strong and resilient communities across Manitoba. We are proud to provide:

- advisory services on administration and operations, finance and other municipal issues
- funding support for operating and capital priorities
- property assessment services
- support for the preparation of development plans, zoning by-laws, subdivisions, and livestock operation policies
- support for emergency planning and preparedness

We look forward to working with you and your municipality. Contact us today and find out how we can be of service by visiting our website at manitoba.ca/ia

Manitoba 

