

1. Town Hall Meeting Guide

Town hall meetings are large events designed for public education and political pressure. A town hall meeting can be planned on any topic, but is most effective when it addresses a relevant such as an upcoming vote on a policy.

Town hall meetings should be held on your turf or in a neutral place in the community such as a church. It is your meeting. You set the agenda. You present testimony. And, if an elected official is present, you make specific demands. It is not a "town meeting" in which many views are represented. It just means you are inviting the whole town.

Town hall meetings are an ideal tactic to mass-educate people in your community (particularly if the issue is hot), engage and pressure a local politician, and earn media for your issue.

Here are step-by-step instructions on how to plan a great event. Most of the steps are based on ensuring high turnout, as that is the major barrier most people face.

A. Find a speaker or speakers for your meeting.

By this time, you will already have a topic (remember, goal first, tactics second). There are several types of speakers, but we recommend you focus on a few key questions.

1. Will they attract people to the meeting?
2. Do they add legitimacy (expert, politician, personally affected by pollution, etc.)?
3. Will they create added pressure on your target (celebrity, community activist, etc.)?

B. Set logistics in advance.

Reserve a room for the town hall meeting in a good location. Churches and community centers are ideal. Unitarian Universalist churches are often very supportive of climate-related work. Set a time (usually during the week), around 7:30.

C. Identifying possible co-sponsors

Co-sponsoring basically means helping publicize the meeting. There is no money involved. We want co-sponsors because it shows that we have a broad coalition. Also, it boosts attendance at the town hall meeting. This applies political pressure to whoever you are trying to pressure.

Think broadly! Possible co-sponsors should include environmental groups, but also contact churches and other faith groups, women's groups, anyone who represents children's rights, elderly groups, civic groups, labor unions, businesses, ethnic and

heritage groups, local political parties, health groups, outdoors groups, local doctors. The object is to build a broad coalition. This will put political pressure on whoever we are trying to enroll for our goal cause. Remember, if it is just environmental groups pressuring the politician, he or she will not be impressed. Try to make them say, "Wow! Everybody wants me to support this."

Research the community. Find out what drives its economy, and what it identifies as distinctive about itself. For example, Annapolis calls itself "America's Sailing Capital." They are very proud of the Chesapeake Bay. That meant that boat rental companies were important to Annapolis, and since they are so fond of the Bay, they were happy to support a town hall meeting on air pollution. Seafood restaurants were also good.

Use Co-op America's Green Pages to find businesses that are especially likely to be supportive. Be sure to get any local Ben & Jerry's, food co-ops, coffeehouses, etc.

Make a huge spreadsheet. Excel is wonderful for this. Separate by category, and keep track of name of business/organization, address, phone number, e-mail address, etc.

Now, the problem with thinking broadly is that it's hard to know when to stop. So, focus on groups and businesses that are most likely to support the meeting. Make a big list, but make sure it fits within your schedule.

1. Goal: 20 groups to co-sponsor, including 5 faith, 5 business

2. Research

a) Get name, number, email, address for all groups we want to approach as sponsors of the event (and to support the bill generally). These groups should include:

- i. Businesses
- ii. Churches, synagogues
- iii. Rotary clubs, kiwis, civic associations, community organizations
- iv. Hospitals
- v. Schools and colleges (if not an entire school, at least a well known faculty member)
- vi. Labor unions (either with local branches or statewide groups)
- vii. Local politicians, members of the County Council, mayor

D. Contacting possible co-sponsors

Send letters. Send lots of letters. In the letters, be very clear about what you are asking from them. All we want most of these people to do is put up some flyers. With some people, we want to be in newsletters and church bulletins, and with some we want them to send out mass e-mails. We also want to put their name down as a co-sponsor. You can see that we are not asking for very much. Make that clear in the letter.

Send different letters based on different interests. For example, if this relates to mercury,

play that up for women and children's groups. If you want it to be a moral issue, send that to the religious groups.

Keep in mind that this is for all practical purposes a mass mailing. That is, it falls into the category of what many people consider "junk mail." Make the letter be real so that people want to read it. And again, make it extremely clear that we are not asking for money. People are distrustful of being contacted by organizations because they expect to be asked for money. We need to change that.

E. Follow-up calls

Give them a week, maybe a little more, before making follow-up calls. When I made follow-up phone calls, I found that most people had no idea what letter I was talking about. Now, I did not actually try this strategy, so I cannot vouch for it, but it might be helpful to make pre-letter phone calls explaining what you are doing and asking who you should send the letter to. Sending letters to the attention of a particular person is much more likely to get it read than just sending them in general to the church/business/organization. Also, it shows that you know what you're doing.

When you are making the follow-up calls, explain quickly what you are doing. Also explain that this is not about money. You will get better responses that way. Most people will say you should talk to someone else. Talk to that other person.

Get the names of everyone you talk to. Having specific contacts will be very helpful. It is much better, for instance, to ask to speak with Gail than to say, "I called last week and someone told me..."

Keep track of every conversation and every voicemail message you leave in your spreadsheet. Also, keep track of the dates you do everything—send letters make calls, leave messages—so you can decide whether to call them back or give them some more time.

A lot of people will need to discuss this with a board or a council or something. Give them time and follow up. Be persistent. If someone says to call back on Thursday, call back on Thursday. If someone says they will call you back on Thursday and they don't, call them on Friday. This is more difficult than it sounds because you will be keeping track of so many different potential co-sponsors. That is one reason recording the dates of everything is so helpful.

Prioritize the people/businesses/organizations who seem interested.

Sometimes people will say they will help publicize it, although they don't want to be listed as a co-sponsor. That is still good. Send them information. If they say they don't have the authority to make that kind of decision, find out who does, and talk to them about it.

F. Volunteer outreach

This should be happening at the same time as the other steps. Go through the database and get a list of everyone in the target area. Pay special attention to those who have marked themselves as volunteers. If they are not volunteers, call them anyway. Maybe they will become volunteers.

When you call them, tell them what we are doing and put it in context so they understand why their area is important. We want these people to have film screening parties. We will send them the film and materials, free, and they invite their friends, etc.

If they want to host a film screening party, send them the film screening guide, film, and any other materials straight away (email Claire for this). Urge them to set a date right away. That way they are committed and you can follow up with them.

If they do not want to host a film screening party, tell them about the town hall meeting anyway. They will be more likely to come having gotten a personal phone call about it.

Sometimes someone may want to volunteer, but not to host a film screening. These people are invaluable resources. Anyone you call is a resource because they are probably more connected to that community than you are. They may have some really good ideas about how to do outreach, who to reach out to, a group that may want to co-sponsor, etc. Listen to them and work with them.

If you feel like you do not have enough people on your list of contacts, and want to get more people involved, set up a street canvassing day in the area, collect names and contact info, and plug them directly into film screenings if possible. I did not get a chance to do this, but I wish I had.

G. Contact local politicians

County council members, city council members, and mayors invite them to the meeting and ask them to be “Event Supporters.” Follow up with anyone who seems interested.

H. Publicity

When you are doing your initial research into businesses, organizations, etc., keep an eye out for any big events in the area around the time of the town hall meeting. That is, county fairs, festivals, clambakes, whatever. Figure out how to get a table and whether it will cost anything, and then, after clearing it with somebody, get the table. This is good, because the table will raise awareness of the organization, expanding your reach within the area, plus you can tell people about the town hall meeting and get them to write letters

to the editor or politician. Even if the event is after the town hall meeting, it is good to keep momentum going and building political pressure.

Design a flyer. If it has a politician's name on it, clear it with his or her office before it goes out to the public. Include the names of all the co-sponsors. Send it out en masse, via e-mail to people who may want to forward it widely, snail mail to people who just want to post it.

Letter to the editor campaigns should be going at the same time as the film screenings. People should be writing letters connecting the legislation to the politician.

Send out media advisories, press releases, etc. Make sure to send out the media advisory a minimum of one day before the event. I am not here for this part, so I will not go into much detail.

I. Last-minute details

Check on everything that might need to be checked on. For instance, call the children's museum and make sure they are bringing their enormous doll. If you have said you would arrange for a volunteer to help them, make sure you have. If Ben & Jerry's is donating ice cream, call them to confirm the amount of ice cream and time of delivery. Again, I am not here for this part, so I won't go into much detail.

J. Town hall meeting

Have an awesome event! Everyone there will realize how important the issue is, the politician will realize he or she wants to support it, the media will glorify the happy reunion of popular support and political action.