

Neighborhood Meeting Best Practices

Idaho Falls strongly believes in citizen participation and collaboration in City planning and development. The 2013 Idaho Falls Comprehensive Plan states the City should develop a program to involve neighbors early in the community development process. Neighborhood meetings at the conceptual stage of development are a powerful tool for developers and surrounding neighbors to come together to share visions, discuss concerns, and work toward a better end result. They also create more informed and productive public hearings because the hearing is no longer the discovery meeting for the residents. To assist in creating successful neighborhood meetings, Idaho Falls has developed this guidebook.

***Note:** This guidebook has been modified to include recommendations for hosting meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific recommendations for safe meetings are included in section X. However, as pandemic guidelines, orders, and rules change, users of this manual should always make sure to check with the local health district for the most current recommendations for gatherings.

1) Meeting Purpose

The neighborhood meeting gives the developer an opportunity to share their development concept with the community and allows neighbors to ask questions and to discuss concerns related to the development proposal. The goal of the neighborhood meeting is to facilitate an open dialog between the developer and the surrounding neighborhood during the early stages of the development process and to give the developer an opportunity to answer questions and to resolve concerns prior to the Planning Commission public meeting.

Neighborhood meetings are required for preliminary plats, planned unit developments (PUD), rezones, and conditional use permits (CUP). Neighborhood meetings may also be beneficial for other types of developments that have impacts on a surrounding area.

Developers are given the opportunity to explain how the proposed development:

- Is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan
- Complies with City code
- Will handle typical concerns such as traffic flow
- Will be compatible with surrounding neighborhood

2) Scheduling and Advertising the Neighborhood Meeting

- The developer should meet with City staff to discuss neighborhood meeting plans, set up, and logistics.
- Set a date, time, and location. For virtual meetings, please see recommendations in section 6.
- Invite the neighborhood
 - Two weeks prior to the meeting an invitation should be sent to residents and property owners in the neighborhood along with information regarding the developer's proposal.
 - The meeting notice should be mailed or delivered to all owners or occupants within three hundred feet (300') of the development project boundary line. Notice should also be given to City staff. City staff can provide mailing names and addresses for properties within area to be given notice.
 - The meeting should generally be held sometime during a normal work week, Monday through Thursday (excluding Holidays) between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.
 - The developer may also publish the notice in media outlets if they wish.

3) Prepare for the Meeting

The developer is the host of the meeting. As the host, the meeting is set-up and facilitated by the developer. The meeting should allow for brief presentations about the project proposed by the developer, who should

initially describe the development and answer questions. The following are also recommended to the developer:

- Create a “quick facts” sheet regarding the project.
- Prepare a 10-15-minute presentation which includes site plans or concept drawings. Remember, this is the best opportunity for the developer to convey his/her excitement and vision about the project to the surrounding neighbors.
- Have business cards to hand out
- Prepare and display sign-up sheet for attendees.
- Prepare sheets for attendees to provide written comments.

4) Meeting Day

Developer should arrive no less than fifteen (15) minutes before the scheduled start time. If the developer needs to set up equipment, they should plan their time accordingly. If you are using audio/visual equipment, be sure to set up and practice ahead of time so there won't be any delays at the meeting. This is especially true for virtual meetings.

Neighborhood meetings are facilitated by the developer and structured in a “question and answer” format in order to capture dialogue and to record public input.

- Call to Order
 - The developer will call the meeting to order, make introductions, and thank everyone for coming.
 - Introduce some basic civility requirements and ask that comments be directed and focused around the project, not individuals in the room.
 - The developer will review the meeting agenda, purpose of meeting, development review, and provide any general neighborhood meeting “ground rules”.
 - The developer will send around the sign-up sheet. Sign-up sheets are extremely valuable to document who attended and to help keep interested parties informed throughout the development process.

- Presentation of the development. Illustrations of the development concept are extremely helpful and valuable to the attendees.
- Question and answer period. Generally, it is best to limit the question and answer time. Approximately 30 minutes is recommended.
- The developer will take meeting notes and send the meeting notes to City staff and anyone who signs in at the meeting.
- Wrap up
 - The developer will end the question and answer period, thank attendees for their comments and remind them to put any additional ideas on the written comment sheets, explain the next steps in the development process, and adjourn the meeting.

5) After the Meeting

The developer should document information and issues gathered from the meeting by preparing a summary report to include the time, date and location of the neighborhood meeting, names and addresses or property owners to whom the notice was sent, as well as names and addresses of all attendees. The meeting summary report should also include a summary of comments, suggestions and discussion, the applicants responses, materials utilized or submitted, and a verbatim transcript of the Neighborhood Meeting.

Developers should consider the information exchanged at the neighborhood meeting and modify the development application, if in the developer's opinion it will improve the project.

Once the summary report is submitted to City staff by the developer, the developer may then turn in the formal application to the City of Idaho Falls.

6) Virtual Meeting Recommendations

Virtual meetings may be a preferable or required option when significant events such as the COVID-19 pandemic prevent large groups of people from gathering together. They are also a useful tool even outside of such events and provide additional opportunity for those who may not be able to attend the meeting physically. However, because technological difficulties and unfamiliarity may exclude some residents from virtual meetings, in-person options are generally preferable when possible. Below are recommendations specifically for virtual meetings:

- When creating the meeting, consider that most connection links are long and difficult to type and that you may not have email addresses of potential invitees. If you are sending letters with log-in information consider one or both of the following:
 - Rather than including the link to the meeting, you can provide your email address and let people know they can contact you for the link.
 - You can also use a tinyurl service to reduce the link to a smaller, more typeable link that you can insert into your letter.
 - A YouTube video with an open comments section or short survey may also be valuable.
- Consider recording the meeting and sending the link to the recording to residents who may not have been able to attend.
- If you are unfamiliar with virtual meetings, practice ahead of time. Know what tools are available to you and how to use them. In particular, know how to share your screen with others.
- Consider having someone on your team help you run the meeting, including managing technical and audio issues and manage the chat features.

Frequently Asked Questions

When can a neighborhood meeting be scheduled?

Any time after the review of the project concept with City staff.

Who sends out the notification letters?

The developer.

How long is a neighborhood meeting?

Typically, neighborhood meetings are one to one-and-a-half (1-1.5) hours.

Are there refreshments at the meeting?

The developer may provide refreshments. Refreshments are not required but are encouraged.

What happens after the neighborhood meeting?

Although the developer is not required to make any or all of the changes suggested at the neighborhood meeting, the developer should be ready to address what was expressed at the neighborhood meeting when the project application is formally submitted. If changes were made as a result of the meeting, those should be pointed out to City staff. If changes were not made, the developer should be prepared to explain why not.

Where will the meeting be held?

It is recommended that the neighborhood meeting to be held at a neutral location near where the project is to take place.

Sample Notice and Sign-up Sheet

Neighborhood Meeting

[Date]

Dear Property Owner or Resident:

This letter is being sent to you to let you know about a development proposal, [Project Name], in your area and to invite you to an informational meeting where the developer will present (his/her) development concept. You can learn more about the proposed project and can ask questions about it.

[Project Name] is a project for [use and/or purpose] at [property address]. The property is zoned [zoning district] and is [# of acres] acres in size. The property presently contains [description of current property].

The proposed project is [description of project]. We welcome and encourage your participation. Your input is an important part of the City's development review process. Please join us for a neighborhood meeting to discuss the proposal on [date and time]. The meeting will be held at [meeting location]. The meeting is an opportunity for you to provide input on the project and to have your questions answered directly by the applicant.

If you are unable to attend the meeting, but would like to provide input or ask questions, please contact [contact name] at [phone number] or [email address]. We look forward to seeing you at the meeting.

Sincerely,

[Name and title]

