



How to Organize a Consensus Conference on Municipal Broadband

A Do It Yourself Guide

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“If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in government to the utmost.”
Aristotle

DIY

There are many ways of engaging underserved communities to define their needs in relation to municipal broadband and to advocate for them. This Do It Yourself (DIY) Guide explains why and how you could involve the public through a consensus conference. It is based on the experience of organizing the “Broadband for All?” consensus conference at Santa Clara University (see broadbandforall.org). Other ideas for activating your community follow at the end of this guide.

Why a Consensus Conference?

The public consensus conference format was developed by the Danish Board of Technology and has been used by government and civil society groups around the world to promote meaningful public education and participation in technology policy debates.

There are several elements of the typical consensus conference. Organizers usually convene about 12 to 25 diverse community members to address a single issue. An advisory panel of knowledgeable stakeholders involved in the issue oversees the fairness of the process. They help suggest and review briefing materials about the issue for the community panel and help choose a group of experts representing a wide range of perspectives on the controversy. The community panelists identify key questions they want to pose to the experts directly at a public hearing. After the hearing, the community panel then works with an experienced facilitator to arrive at a consensus statement of policy recommendations. These findings are presented to government, the media, and the public to attract attention to the issue and stimulate ongoing deliberation. In some cases, stakeholders and experts may be given an opportunity to respond to, but not to alter, the community members’ conclusions.

“Democracy, it appears, is a bit chancy. But its chances also depend on what we do ourselves.”

Robert A. Dahl

Scholars and organizers of consensus conferences have found that this process can enrich public debate on technology policy issues more effectively than traditional public hearings and professional conferences, where the public’s role is often limited to posing questions or making brief comments. In addition, because consensus conferences offer more education to community members on the issues and a fuller opportunity to deliberate actively about policies than focus groups and public opinion surveys, consensus conferences can produce better informed views of community needs. However, like any way of engaging the public, consensus conferences have their advantages and disadvantages that should be considered before deciding to organize one.

Strengths

- **Education:** bringing together technical experts and community members in public discussion aimed at supporting the community’s understanding of technical issues
- **Participation:** inviting community members to take center stage in forming technology policy
- **Insight:** allowing community members to raise social concerns and identify community needs that are often absent in negotiations between industry and government stakeholders over technology policy
- **Deliberation:** promoting reasoned conclusions by the public through deliberation about complex technological, economic, and cultural issues
- **Authenticity:** transcending control by any particular stakeholder in the issue, thereby strengthening the community panel’s ability to offer informed opinions free of manipulation by others

Weaknesses

- **Limited representation:** the small sample size of the community panel means that its recommendations cannot be seen as representative of the entire community. Thus, consensus conferences are often used to generate policy ideas and gauge the reactions of a slice of the public that has become especially informed about the issue, rather than to determine the ultimate outcome of policy debates
- **Impact on policy:** Unless a government agency organizes the conference, government attention to the policy recommendations is not guaranteed, but must be earned
- **Resource intensive:** If done well, these events require greater resources in staff time to organize than most public hearings or community meetings

Why Municipal Broadband?

How municipal broadband might help close the digital divide is a very good issue for a consensus conference. The consensus conference format can educate community participants and attendees at the public hearing about the technical, economic and political complexities of the issue. If the conference is held at the start of a community's process of considering a municipal broadband system, it can help educate government and private partners about how to design and fund such a system to maximize benefits to underserved groups. The conference is a good means to foster productive dialogue on equal terms between underserved groups and the broad range of public and private stakeholders whose interests are affected by municipal broadband, including government agencies and private telecommunication providers.

How to Organize a Consensus Conference

The goal of a consensus conference is to involve the public in generating well-informed policy ideas. It is not to ratify decisions that have already been made by government and private partners. Nor is it to have members of the public echo the views of the conference organizers. Whether the conference is held by government or civil society organizations, the organizers must be open to the community panelists' arriving at their own authentic policy outcomes . . . whatever they may be. Not every organization can commit to hosting an open-ended process. If not, it should consider other ways to engage the public.

The timing of the consensus conference is very important. It should be held as early as possible in a community's process for considering and planning a major project such as a municipal broadband system, before major decisions are made that will shape plans for the system and digital inclusion efforts. Community participants may go on to participate further in public advisory boards and task forces to implement the system and ensure that it is fully available to underserved communities.

Not every consensus conference must be the same, but here are the major steps used by the "Broadband for All?" conference organizers. For more details, see broadbandforall.org.

"What the people want is very simple - they want an America as good as its promise."

Barbara Jordan

1. *Advisory Panel*

To involve the community from the beginning of the conference planning, recruit an advisory panel of experts and stakeholders who will contribute to the conference's:

- **Fairness:** Advisors can help ensure that all views and interests are included in the process by approving your plans for recruiting community panelists, reviewing the background briefing materials you compile to educate the community participants about the issues, and approving the composition of the experts who will testify at the public hearing
- **Legitimacy:** Advisors can vouch that the conference is inclusive and fair to all sides
- **Publicity:** Advisors can help publicize the public hearing and policy recommendations through their professional and community networks

Advisory panelists may be drawn from local government, community-based organizations (especially any with prior knowledge of digital inclusion and underserved groups, such as community technology centers, organizations that serve the disabled, immigrants, low-income people, rural people), the telecommunications industries, and other local institutions with a stake in broadband (small business, public schools, job training and community economic development providers, etc.). Eight to fifteen members is a good number.

2. *Community Panel*

Decide what kinds of people you want on your community panel. Because the “Broadband for All?” conference focused on digital inclusion, it aimed to amplify the voice of underserved people. Thus, all participants came from groups least likely to have broadband access: low-income people, the disabled, rural residents, immigrants, seniors,

and African-Americans and Latinos. Traditional consensus conferences often include a wider range of participants that aims to represent more sectors of the community. The aim of your conference should determine the composition of the community panel.

Community panelists are traditionally recruited by placing ads in newspapers and other community media. Given the decline of newspaper readership among many groups and the fragmentation of media audiences, other means are necessary. We found it most helpful to distribute applications to join the panel through social service agencies and community-based organizations that could help explain the purpose of the conference.

Whether panelists should be compensated for their civic participation is a matter of debate. Our view was that not compensating low-income participants erects a barrier against their participation, which often requires securing child care, foregoing weekend work opportunities, and travel costs. Therefore, we offered stipends to each participant, which they later told us was essential for recruiting them.

Through written applications and follow-up phone interviews, you can identify people who are:

- **Independent:** Free of close ties to any one stakeholder group (for example, by asking about their jobs and organizational affiliations).
- **Open-minded:** Eager to learn about the issues and to deliberate productively with others (for example, by asking about what they know already, why they want to participate, and whether they find it helpful to listen to the views of others when making up their own minds).
- **Diverse:** Able to contribute different perspectives by drawing on their life experience (by asking about their demographics, access to broadband,

and how they use the Internet).

Community panels usually range between 12 and 25 participants. Having fewer members permits better full-group deliberation, but at the expense of broader community involvement. Small group break-out discussions may be incorporated if the group is larger.

3. Pre-Conference Education

Prior to the conference, provide the community panelists with background briefing materials. These may include a [background briefing paper](#) that summarizes major policy questions and different views on them, written from a neutral perspective and in language that avoids jargon and explains technical terms clearly. (Have a wide range of people read the paper first, such as an 8th grade student and a person for whom English is a second language, to ensure that it is accessible). You might also compile a bibliography of readings on municipal broadband and digital inclusion that advocate for particular perspectives and that are also accessible to non-experts. During the conference you can then provide specific readings to the Community panelists based on the topics of interest to each person.

To evaluate the conference, organizers may consider conducting pre-conference interviews or surveys with participants to establish their level of knowledge on the issues, nascent policy views on them, and so on.

4. The Conference

Consensus conferences typically unfold over a short, intensive time-period. We chose to hold the “Broadband for All?” conference over three successive weekends using the following agenda.

Weekend 1

- *Welcome and Orientation:* Introductions, discussion of goals for conference, process for how the group will deliberate, group agreement on “rules of deliberation” for the conference (led by the facilitator)
- *Refresher:* Presentation of major policy questions and perspectives on them given by the conference organizers
- *Discussion:* Full group (and small group break-outs, if the group is large) discussion and clarification of the full range of issues and the panelists’ interests and concerns, oriented toward helping the group begin to refine the main questions of the conference provided by the organizers and add their own questions
- *Identify Needs for More Information:* Each panelist requests additional information, analyses or other resources from the organizers (especially from their bibliography of background readings compiled beforehand)
- *Preparation for Public Hearing:* Organizers discuss format of public hearing and experts who will appear; panelists identify key questions they want to ask each expert; organizers may share questions with panelists prior to the hearing

Weekend 2

- *Public Hearing:* Each expert offers brief testimony followed by question and answer period with community panelists; audience might submit additional questions on index cards to be read by facilitator
- *Deliberation:* Full group (and perhaps small group break-outs) refine and prioritize questions of the conference in light of new information and views from public hearing and readings, explore different views on policy questions, and begin to pose recommendations

Weekend 3

- *Deliberation:* Continued refining of policy recommendations
- *Drafting:* First drafts of policy recommendations (facilitator and organizers may assist in this)
- *Testing for Consensus:* Full group consideration of each policy recommendation and testing for consensus on each; only those recommendations that are supported by consensus survive in [final report](#) of the conference

Post-Conference

- *Publicity:* Organizers publicize community panel's policy recommendations to government, industry, community organizations, and the media; community panelists may be available for interviews
- *Evaluation:* Organizers may conduct post-conference interviews or surveys with participants to gauge whether their knowledge and views of the issues changed and their perceptions of whether the conference was fair, inclusive, effective, and so on.

Key Personnel

The ideal consensus conference team will involve at least one person in each of the following roles.

Project Manager: Coordinates fundraising; recruiting of advisory panel, community panel, experts for public hearing; other project personnel; production of background materials for community panel; public hearing; publicity of policy recommendations; evaluation.

Subject Matter Expert: Draws on knowledge about the main issues of the conference and contacts in the field to help raise funds; recruit advisory panel and experts for public hearing; draft or identify background materials for community panel and answer questions that arise during their deliberations.

Facilitator: Drafts agenda for community panel deliberations and leads discussion.

Evaluator: Independent, external evaluator drafts and administers evaluation materials.

Support Staff: Handles logistics for all aspects of conference, including coordinating meetings, photocopying, food, public hearing, publicity, and evaluation.

Assuming that funding is secured and the project manager is working full-time on the consensus conference, the process of organizing a conference may take 6 to 9 months from beginning recruitment of the advisory panel to publicizing the community panel's recommendations.

Other Ways to Engage the Community

Education, Outreach, and Organizing

Consult with and educate the community about the relevance of broadband to people's lives. Begin by asking community groups about the most pressing needs of local residents and educating them about broadband applications that are most likely to address those needs.

Avoid leading with the issue of broadband infrastructure, which many people do not see as immediately relevant to their basic needs. Instead, educate community organizations and members about how broadband can help address the issues of greatest concern to them, which often include public safety, jobs, education, health care, access to government services, community empowerment, maintaining one's culture and relationships with distant family members, etc.

Community consultation and education might be done through many means, including:

- Organizing a dialogue of grassroots community-based organizations about local needs and how broadband could meet them
- Mapping social and organizational networks in communities to strategize about how to reach and activate underserved groups
- Mapping existing community broadband networks to find gaps and avoid duplication of efforts by tapping into existing networks where possible to extend service to some areas

- Organizing constituencies into user groups who can advocate for their needs with network providers and/or elected officials to make the case for different elements of digital inclusion
- Working to expand existing programs that provide affordable computer hardware and training to low-income residents

Digital Inclusion Task Forces and Policies

Engage the community in each stage of municipal broadband project planning and implementation through broad-based task forces that create comprehensive policies.

- Advocate for formal community involvement in a Digital Inclusion Task Force that advises local governments from the earliest phases of the project and participates in the full range of decisions about it
- Advocate that local governments adopt a comprehensive Digital Inclusion Policy that specifies what system providers and others will do to ensure that underserved communities get affordable access to service, equipment, training, the opportunity to receive and create local content online, and privacy and security protections

“Successful organizing is based on the recognition that people get organized because they, too, have a vision.”
Paul Wellstone

Coordination with State and National Developments

Coordinate community involvement efforts with statewide and national policies that affect local municipal broadband projects, including:

- Sharing information among communities about strategies for digital inclusion and how to negotiate with system providers (what benefits are being won from system providers in other communities and how)
- Engaging with state and national task forces and legislation that can support or hinder local broadband efforts and community involvement (for example, by limiting cities' ability to provide broadband or by creating statewide policy or funding for broadband development)

Further Resources

Municipal Broadband

Hammond, IV, A. S., & Raphael, C. (2006). [Municipal Broadband: A Background Briefing Paper](#). *This paper summarizes debates over whether communities should invest in municipal broadband and, if so, what sorts of digital inclusion policies may be appropriate. It is an accessible introduction for newcomers to these issues.*

[Broadband for All? Final Report and Recommendations of a Consensus Conference on Municipal Broadband and Digital Inclusion](#) *Contains detailed recommendations on digital inclusion and community involvement in municipal broadband networks by a group of diverse Silicon Valley community members who intensively studied and discussed these issues over a three week period in October 2006.*

[San Francisco Digital Inclusion Strategy](#)

The city's draft strategy was released in January 2007. Versions are available in Spanish and Chinese at the [San Francisco TechConnect](#) web site.

[Municipal Broadband, Community Involvement and Digital Inclusion: A California Dialogue](#)

Includes an outline of the elements of digital inclusion and strategies for engaging the public in municipal broadband planning produced by representatives from community-based organizations, community technology centers, local governments, foundations, academics, and others who attended an April 2007 meeting on these issues.

Consensus Conferences

[Danish Board of Technology](#)

Description of consensus conference format pioneered by DBT and reports of past conferences.

[National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation](#)

Good resources on public dialogue and deliberation in general.

Hendriks, C.M. (2005). Consensus conferences and planning cells: Lay citizen deliberations. In J. Gastil & P. Levine (eds.), *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), pp. 80-110. *Accessible summary of theory, practice, limits, and challenges of consensus conferences.*

Joss, S., & Durant, J. (1995). *Public participation in science: The role of consensus conferences in Europe*. London: Science Museum. *Contains first systematic evaluations of consensus conferences.*



Funders

Community Technology Foundation of California

Helping underserved communities secure social justice, access, and equity through the application of information and communications technologies.

California Consumer Protection Foundation

Administering consumer trust funds and distributing grants in the public interest.

For more information about “Broadband for All?”

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