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Public Forums:

An Event Planning Toolkit For Communities



Authors

This toolkit was developed by Community Food Strategies to support food councils in planning community forum events.

Community Food Strategies is a multi-organizational team of food systems experts that provides leadership and technical support for food council development throughout North Carolina. Community Food Strategies partners with councils in all phases of development, with the goal of building more sustainable, resilient, and equitable food systems.

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To learn more information about our work, please visit:
www.communityfoodstrategies.org

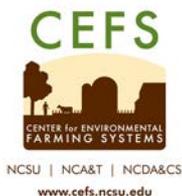


Table of Contents

01

Introduction

Page 4

02

Planning A
Public Forum

Pages 5-17

03

Day of the
Event

Page 18

04

Following Your
Event

Page 19



Appendix and
Worksheet

Available at
communityfoodstrategies.org



Introduction

Most of this document will refer to food councils as the hosts of these events, however any community group can use this toolkit as a guide to organizing a successful public forum.

Food councils are cross-sector organizations that help promote more resilient food systems in their communities. They typically assess the current food situation, build community connections and collaboration on food system issues, make recommendations on how to improve it, and communicate recommendations to organizations and policymakers who can take action.

What is a public forum?

In the context of food councils, public forums, or community forums, typically are meetings that bring people together to discuss and to collect information on pertinent community food system issues. Often these events are highly publicized to increase the number of participants and range of perspectives. In many circumstances, specific community stakeholders are invited to participate.

Overall, a public forum is a way for your food council to increase and share your council's knowledge of the local food system, as well as to engage more broadly with the general community and with specific food system stakeholders.

Why would a food council host a public forum?

Hosting a well-attended public forum can increase community buy-in and grow the community network of both new and existing councils. Food councils in North Carolina have hosted forums as a way to launch their group, solicit broad community input, present recent work, and to invite new members to their work teams.

When used to launch a council, a public forum is typically organized by a task force that has been working together for 9-18 months to draft a charter and to build community interest in forming a new food council.

Worksheet and Appendix

Please use the accompanying Worksheet and Appendix (available at www.communityfoodstrategies.org/toolkits) to craft your plans. We suggest forming your committee, reading this toolkit, then working together through the worksheet in one or two meetings to get all of your plans together in one document. We recommend that groups work together in-person as much as possible and to use collaborative technology – like Google Drive and conference calls– to work together remotely and virtually. The Appendix has sample language that can be used for invitations, promotions and thank-you's.

Community Food Strategies has a separate event planning toolkit – ***Candidate Forums: An Event Planning Toolkit for Communities***– that has some of the same steps outlined in this document. That toolkit is specifically designed to help food councils plan a community forum that showcases a dialogue with or between candidates for public office during an election.

Planning a Public Forum

This toolkit will walk you through the process of planning a public forum. We advise using the accompanying worksheet to fill out all of your initial plans (Steps 1-8) in one or two meetings two to four months before your event, and your final plans (Steps 9-10) in a meeting a month before the date.

2-4 MONTHS BEFORE EVENT

1. Form a Committee
2. Create an Evaluation Plan
3. Identify Partners
4. Develop an Agenda
5. Coordinate Initial Logistics
6. Develop a Budget
7. Develop Promotion Strategy
8. Recruit Volunteers

1 MONTH BEFORE EVENT

9. Finalize Promotions
10. Finalize Logistics



Form a Committee

Form a Public Forum Planning Committee of three or four people from your food council task force to plan and organize your event. Each person in your task force has an important role to play in your public forum, but this committee will take the lead in organizing the public forum and delegating tasks to other task force members.

The first task of your Committee is to set a meeting schedule. The group should work together to identify monthly meeting dates and locations that work for the majority of the other committee members. If anyone cannot attend in person, try to find a way for members to meet by phone.

The Logistics Coordinator is responsible for sending out meeting reminders and keeping the group communicating regularly by email, phone and in person.

Suggested roles for your Public Forum Planning Committee (roles with specific tasks are outlined in Appendix B and throughout the text using these symbols):



Logistics Coordinator - identify space and materials for event, manage donations/budget, send out meeting reminders to the Committee



Media & Promotions Coordinator - get people to show up, contact media outlets, send follow-ups after the event, contact and coordinate with potential co-sponsors



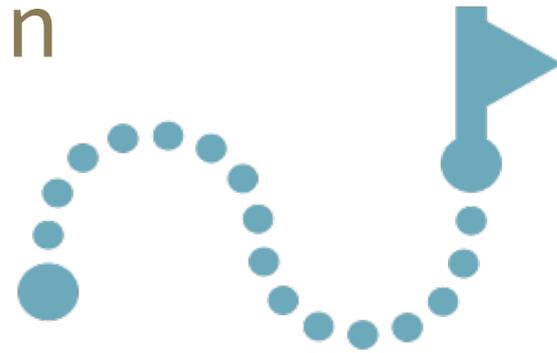
Volunteer Coordinator - organize volunteer roles, recruit volunteers and support them during the planning process and the day of the event

Create an Evaluation Plan

Planning to track the success of your public forum is important. Tracking different metrics will help plan for future events and help write future grant applications.

Creating a Google Worksheet to track metrics is an easy way for all volunteers to enter in different measures of success during the planning process and after the forum.

The Committee should also create an evaluation form (template can be found in the Appendix) to gather input from your attendees. Your Logistics Coordinator should finalize your evaluation plans for the event and make sure that surveys are printed.



SUGGESTED METRICS TO TRACK

- # of event attendees
- # of volunteers involved with the event
- # of email sign-ups for listserv
- # of new media contacts made
- media coverage before and after the event
- \$ of in-kind or fiscal donations
- # of applications submitted to join the new food council

Identify Partners

A strong coalition of sponsors will help to encourage guests to attend and will strengthen community participation.



Work together as a committee to identify potential organizational partners or sponsors on your event. If you are organizing a forum to launch a new council, it might not make sense to have co-sponsors or partners. If you are hosting a forum to ask for community input on food system issues, it might make sense to partner with other organizations who are also working on similar issues.

Co-sponsors are not necessary but can be helpful by providing support with planning, promotion, supplies, logistics, volunteers, name-power, and more.



Your **Media & Promotions Coordinator** should follow-up with each potential partner about possible collaboration. This Coordinator should be the main point of contact between your council and any partners during the event planning process.

Use the template provided in the Appendix to create a Partnership Agreement Form. This can be made into a Google Form and sent to potential co-sponsors and partners.

Design an Agenda

Create a list of goals for the event, and then design an agenda based on those goals.

List the goals that your food council hopes to accomplish by hosting this event. Goals may include:

- announcing a new food council,
- generally educating the public on food councils and what they have done in other communities,
- presenting or soliciting information about the community food system directly to and from community members
- asking people to get involved with the food council

Then, craft an agenda that allows your food council to accomplish these goals. Finally, make a list of the materials that will be needed to accomplish your agenda.

Tip: Create a Background Slideshow

Create a slideshow that can play in the background. Slides can highlight the work of the food council or task force, partner organizations, or event co-sponsors. You can set up the slides to play on a loop during any open networking time or during the event welcome.

Sample Forum Agenda To Launch A Food Council

1. Food Council Overview: an introduction of food councils and what they do
2. History of the Task Force: the context for why task force members have been working to form a food council to serve your community
3. What we've learned about the community's food system
4. Open dialogue or interactive activity on community food system challenges and opportunities
5. New food council structure & function
6. How to Get Involved: an open invitation from the task force to the public to join the new council

Coordinate Initial Logistics

Date and Time:

Ideally, your forum should be held during the middle of the week and in the early evening to allow time for attendees to arrive after work or daytime commitments. It might be difficult to find a date and time that will work for all of your members and important stakeholders to attend, so be sure to think about other community events that may be happening on that date.

Accessibility:

Try to host the event in a central location near public transportation access. Make sure your location is disability accessible. As a committee, decide if you are going to provide childcare and/or translation services for your event. Think about the budget that you have to cover these services and about in-kind donations or volunteers that could be accessed from within your food council or through other community partners.

Food:

As a committee, decide if you will be providing food and/or beverages at the event. Identify the potential budget that can be spent on food or beverages. Food councils are encouraged to source any food or beverages from locally owned businesses that are purchasing food from local and regional producers.



The **Logistics Coordinator** should gather information on each of these logistical tasks, identify all options available, and bring them back to the committee for final approval.

This Coordinator should also maintain contact with the event space, food and beverage providers, and any potential services throughout the event planning period.

Develop a Budget

While a budget for food and festivities can help to bring in a crowd, ultimately your council has the ability to host this type of event at zero cost outside of printing.



It is entirely possible to pull off an event with a \$0 budget. You can host a successful event with a limited budget. Determine what budget your food council might need for this event.

As a committee, think of possible ways to raise funds or solicit in-kind donations for event costs.

POTENTIAL COSTS MAY INCLUDE:

- event space rental
- translation services
- printing
- childcare
- Promotion
- food/beverages

The Logistics Coordinator will take on the responsibility for managing the budget, for following up on fiscal or in-kind donations opportunities, and for coordinating with the other committee members around potential co-sponsorship / in-kind donation opportunities.



The biggest cost for our forum event was printing. We typically spend most of what little budget we have for our events on printing out signage and materials. We try to work with community partners for donations of food and beverages, which is really helpful with a small budget for this event.



– Nicole Peterson,
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Food Policy Council

Develop Promotion Strategy

Be creative with your promotional outlets and get everyone involved in promoting the event.

As a Committee, discuss an overall strategy for getting people to your event. Make a list of media sources with contacts and where you would like to promote the event (newspaper, radio, television, etc.). This is a good place to engage your co-sponsoring organizations. They may be willing to share local media lists or contact reporters whom they have good relationships.

Consider opportunities for getting the word to your audience, like table tents on restaurant tables, flyers at coffee shops, service provider offices, or radio public service announcements.

The Media & Promotions Coordinator should contact the media and coordinate all efforts to build attendance. This is a good role for someone with communications experience.

The Media & Promotions Coordinator should send all media contacts an email and hard copy of a press release, (template in the Appendix) which should include date, time, place of the forum, co-sponsoring organizations and the flyer.



"We organized a cross-sector list of co-sponsors to support our event by promoting the forum through their social media and email lists. This helped to bring in a diverse and large audience. Having a variety of co-sponsors from the local level in Durham, as well as from regional and statewide organizations, really helped us to get the word out and reach people who had never even heard of our council."

- Neal Curran, Durham Farm and Food Network



Develop Promotions Strategy – Create an Event Flyer

The flyer should contain a link to where people can RSVP to attend the event using a simple Google Form or other survey software.

The Media & Promotions Coordinator should coordinate the development of a flyer that is visually appealing, concise and includes the following information:

- Event name
- Date and time
- Event type
- Event point of contact / RSVP
- Event description
- Event sponsors



Develop Promotions Strategy – Send a Save-the-Date Flyer

The **Media & Promotions Coordinator** should coordinate sending the “Save-the-Date” announcement (template in Appendix) with the flyer to all of your network contacts. Everyone on the committee should ask other community leaders to promote the “Save-the-Date” to their networks.

Advertise on your food council’s website, email lists and social media. Create a hashtag for your event (template in Appendix).

Be creative! If you have co-sponsors for the event, each organization should target their own constituents and members by sending out an announcement.

TIP: ENGAGE FOOD SYSTEM STAKEHOLDERS

As a group, brainstorm a list of important community food system stakeholders to personally invite to the event. This list might include:

- heads of local government departments
- other local elected officials
- farmers and agriculture organizations
- food producers & distributors
- organizations working on food access issues
- restaurant owners
- the visitor’s bureau
- conservation groups
- faith leaders
- community garden groups, etc.

Make a note of who on the food council has a direct connection with these important stakeholders and who might be willing to make a personal ask for them to attend (template can be found in the Appendix).

Recruit Volunteers

Make a list of additional volunteer roles that might need to be filled for both publicizing the forum and on the day of the event.

There are many roles for volunteers from your food council and your co-sponsors, including hanging up flyers, translation for promotional materials and for the day of the event, childcare, set-up and break down, signing-in attendees, managing parking, etc.

Brainstorm and then make a list of whom in your council, or your extended network, has the skills and potential interest in filling these roles.

One very important volunteer role is to give the welcome for the event and closing out the event. Ideally, the welcome and exit will be done by food council leaders who can set the stage for the event and direct attendees and guests towards follow up actions at the end of the event. Another important role is an event photographer and videographer.



The **Volunteer Coordinator** should contact potential volunteers to request their assistance. This Coordinator should be the main point of contact for all volunteers and should support them in fulfilling their roles on the day of the event.

Finalize Promotions

Make one last push to increase attendance!

The **Media & Promotions Coordinator** should follow up with all media contacts with updated promotional materials about your event and your food council. Ask the media contacts to promote the event in community events calendars or with a public service announcement.

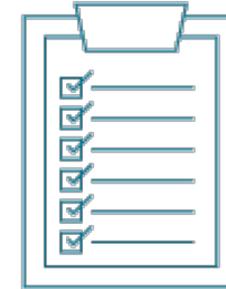
Provide all food council members with the most up-to-date version of your promotional materials and ask them to distribute the information to their networks.

Check back in on your list of food system stakeholders. Who has confirmed and who needs another invitation?

Continue to share your promotional materials on your website and through social media.

Finalize Logistics

Use the checklists to make sure all the tasks get completed.



FULL COMMITTEE:

- Finalize your agenda.
- Finalize any logistical concerns (A/V, microphone, parking, refreshments).
- Make plans for convening after the forum to reflect or debrief on the event.
- Final confirmation of all materials and supplies (parking signs, restroom signs, sign-in sheets, nametags, pens, clipboards, easels, etc.).

LOGISTICS COORDINATOR:

- Review the event budget and make sure that any vendors have been paid.
- Reconfirm site arrangements. Make sure that your reserved site has all of the accommodations you need including set-up instructions for the room, tables, microphones, etc..
- Print evaluations and all other printed materials.
- Gather all needed supplies for the day of the event.

MEDIA & PROMOTION COORDINATOR:

- Check in with partners and co-sponsors to coordinate any needs with the other members of your committee.
- Send another press release (template in Appendix) to all media contacts. If possible, provide media packets to media contacts that include information on your organization, co-sponsoring organizations, and guest information.
- Write an op-ed piece on the local food system and why the food council is forming to work together to improve it. Be sure to restate that the event is nonpartisan.

VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR:

- Remind volunteers of their duties and reconfirm their attendance.
- Gather any materials needed for volunteers.

Day of the Event

Keep the following tasks in mind on the day of your candidate forums.

LOGISTICS COORDINATOR:

- Set up the check-in table(s).
- Set up information table(s).
- Check that microphones and speakers work.
- Set up the projector and any presentation.
- Post signs in the building with arrows directing attendees to the event and the restrooms.
- Provide sign-in sheets and all other supplies to appropriate volunteers.

MEDIA & PROMOTION COORDINATOR:

- Be prepared with talking points about the event and why the food council is hosting the public forum.
- Be available to support and guide any media on site during the event.

VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR:

- Delegate responsibilities to additional volunteers.
- Support volunteers in their roles.



Following Your Event

Follow up from this type of event is critical. Your council should leverage all of the work that went into hosting your event into stronger community engagement and relationships with stakeholders. Quick follow up with your event attendees will help them to remember your council and your issues.

Take the following actions within a week after your event:

LOGISTICS COORDINATOR:

- Send thank you letters to event host location and food and beverage partners.
- Contact attendees from sign-up sheets within the next two days (while the event is fresh in their minds) to let them know how to get involved with your council.

VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR:

- Send thank you letters to volunteers (template in Appendix).

MEDIA & PROMOTIONS COORDINATOR:

- Send your partners and co-sponsors thank you letters (templates in Appendix).
- Use your website and social media to recap the event.
- Write a Letter to the Editor or an Op Ed piece about the event and send to your media contacts.
- Thank your media contacts for promotion and covering the event.

good luck



COMMUNITY FOOD STRATEGIES

Community Food Strategies

Please contact with any questions and requests for support:

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