

**Public deliberation** is a process whereby participants--

- ❖ Identify multiple approaches to a central issue.
- ❖ Weigh the costs and consequences of each approach.
- ❖ Determine community values.
- ❖ Develop a common ground for collaborative action.
- ❖ Decide on what kind of future the community desires for itself.

❖ **Identify multiple approaches to a central issue**

Most public issues are complex problems. They affect a wide-range of individuals and impact many different aspects of community life. Issues such as how to stimulate economic growth or provide comprehensive healthcare seldom have simple solutions; they require a range of responses resulting from multiple approaches to the issue.

❖ **Weigh the costs and consequences of each approach**

Since decisions about community issues will affect such a diversity of people, deliberation encourages participants to fully examine the implications of each approach. Each approach has pros and cons. Each approach has benefits and drawbacks. Each approach has costs and consequences that citizens may or may not have considered.

Upon reflection, a community may realize that it is unwilling to accept the consequences of an approach it once highly favored. On the other hand, a community may determine that the benefits of a particular approach outweigh the costs and the drawbacks associated with it. For example, a community may decide that restrictions on gun purchasing and ownership are acceptable limitations on the right to bear arms if they also serve to reduce the number and frequency of gun-related crimes. Ultimately, how individuals weigh the costs and consequences of each approach depends largely upon what they value most.

❖ **Determine community values**

The underlying values held by decision-makers significantly affect which approaches they choose to take in order to address a particular concern. What a person holds most valuable impacts what costs and consequences one is willing or unwilling to accept. Yet, even the most opinionated and outspoken person may not truly recognize the values and the emotions that influence her perspective. The process of deliberation therefore enables people to identify what they value and why. People who have a deeper understanding of how they think and feel about an issue are better situated to make sound decisions.

Moreover, individuals who participate in deliberation gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for how other people view the same concern. While people may not change their view of the issue, they undoubtedly will change their perception of one another. The community begins to define itself based on commonalities rather than differences. Members of the community identify with one another, and people gravitate toward a common purpose. They cultivate a sense of shared values.

❖ **Develop a common ground for collaborative action**

Behind every approach to an issue lies a range of concerns, values, emotions, and personal experiences that influence the choices people make. Even individuals who share

similar concerns may experience conflict when asked to deal with the costs and consequences of a particular approach. People must confront the complexities of the issue and work through the tensions that exist. As people identify their personal values, as they focus around a common purpose, and as they struggle with the difficult processes of deliberation and coming to public judgment, individuals establish a foundation of mutual understanding, respect and trust.

It is important to recognize that individuals may not develop consensus; they may not come to full and complete agreement. However, because deliberation strengthens ties among people who hold similar views and bridges the divide between people with differing perspectives, collaboration becomes a true reality. Deliberation builds strong relationships. It promotes a shared sense of direction and develops the common ground necessary for community action.

❖ **Decide what kind of future the community desires for itself**

Deliberation opens people up to new ways of thinking about community issues. It creates new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. Deliberation helps people to see new possibilities. When people see new possibilities, they can see steps to take together that can transform their community's future. This process of getting citizens together to talk about what's important to them, assessing community capacities and assets, and making and working a plan of action is a roadmap for community development that any concerned group of citizens can use. The model on the next page shows the cycle of community development. If people can't understand each other enough to work together, they won't be able to improve their community.