



## Personal Perspective

# How the city inflicts civic abuse

By Charlie Chong

*Mr. Chong titled the following article, "How to Manipulate Meetings or Using Public Process with Predetermined Outcomes."*

This work is the result of many years of experience with how the city government of Seattle does the public process. For a sympathetic understanding, one needs to read Seattle history and realize that our city has a world-class record of strong labor unions and corrupt mayors. (See "Skid Road" by Murray Morgan. Also the phrase "public process with predetermined outcomes" is borrowed from Matt Fox, chair of the University District Council.)

### 1. Notices

The meeting notices you send out should include only your priorities. Exclude anything your opponents favor. If you must appear fair and include some that people will insist upon, then place them at the end of the meeting when people will be tired, some would have left, and time might run out.

In sending out notices or invitations to attend, be sure that your proponents are given priority treatment — by telephone or e-mail. For your opponents or the general public (when you have to include the general public), use obscure means of notification — like press notices to papers that won't print them, early notices with no reminders and, best of all, have the notices go out so they arrive *after* the meeting.

### 2. Organizing

For a well-controlled meeting, use only staff and/or volunteers selected from your side. This includes people at the sign-in table; doormen who look intimi-

dating to keep out the riffraff or to discourage loud protests; tellers to count votes; writers to write on the butcher paper on the wall to give the impression that you are seriously considering the people's suggestions (after the meeting you wait until the hall is vacated then you roll up the butcher paper and recycle); chairs and "feeders" for small groups. Feeders are undisclosed proponents who feed favorable questions or comments so the chair can appear to be neutral.

Since you cannot usually begin with small groups (known as the divide-and-conquer tactic of manipulation) and since tradition is so, start with a general assembly. Be sure that the chair will move the agenda along quickly before people unite in a realization of what's happening, i.e. get them into small groups fast. If there is a hint of opposition, say that this is more democratic and allows more people to make suggestions. Be warned that in West Seattle, people are known to walk out as soon as you mention small groups.

One of the most favored types of meetings is the "open house" affair. In this, there is little opportunity for groups to form to question or to protest. Various visuals, with color and vague specifics, are placed around the room with staff standing at each to answer questions or to make sales pitches. As far as citizens' "input" is concerned, have one or two places where they can write down their suggestions. (As noted above, when the hall is vacated after the open house, recycle.)

To show the public how fair your analysis has been, you of course must give them three options to consider. Remember

the used-car sales strategy: show them a) an unusable junk car in their price range, b) an expensive model beyond their reach, and c) the car you really want to sell. Some people call this the environmental-impact-study system.

### 3. Reporting

Be sure that your pre-selected chairs of small groups do the reporting from their groups.

Schedule the reporting so that there is no time, or almost no time, for discussion by the assembly (if there are people still there).

Do not allow anyone else to participate in writing the written report. This way, you get to write the public recommendations. Better yet, write the written report with recommendations from the public *before* the meeting.

### 4. Troubleshooting

Here are opposition tactics to expect:

Challenges to the agenda. People might try to add items, rearrange items, add more time or call for less time.

Other problems to watch out for: Refusal to break into small groups. Insistence that each small group select its chair and that each member identify his or her associations. Insistence that each small group select its own reporters. Demands that written reports be available by definite time and dates.

Also beware of attendees who use "Roberts' Rules of Order."

*Admiral-area resident Charlie Chong is chairman of the Pike Place Market Constituency, a public-interest group. He is also a former Seattle City Council member.*