

# OPEN HOUSE PUBLIC MEETINGS



*For the past several years, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection has been using an open house format for its public meetings. This format includes the same basic elements as traditional public hearing events — information exchange, question and answer discussions and public comment opportunities. The difference between the two formats, however, is in the way information is presented.*

*Traditional public hearing events include speakers at a lectern and a fixed, linear agenda. In open house meetings, agendas are self-guided and facilitate one-on-one conversations with agency staff and technical experts. Like all public hearing events, open house public meetings require formal notice and include public comment. Public Meetings may be recorded.*

## What to Expect

- » Stations are set up, each focusing on a specific topic, to present information via graphics, fact sheets, maps, photos, models or videos.
- » DEP staff and technical experts are at stations to provide information and answer questions.
- » The same information that would be available at a traditional public hearing is available at an open house.
- » Open house hearings span several hours so that people can come and go at their convenience.
- » Citizens have the opportunity to provide comments and input, both in writing and orally.

## How to Comment

- » A comment station is available the entire duration of the meeting so citizens are able to comment in writing or orally at their convenience with little waiting.
- » Citizens can turn in comment cards during the hearing, mail them in later or submit them via email before the comment-period deadline.
- » For those who wish to provide comments orally, staff is available to transcribe comments and help fill in the comment cards. Recorders can also be used to record comments.
- » Public comment is sometimes accepted electronically (via email or website) before and after a public meeting. In these cases, comment submission information is included in the official public notice or calendar announcement. Comments will still be taken at the open house meeting.

## Benefits

- » **Convenience** – Encourages greater attendance because people can drop by at their convenience, get information and stay as long as they wish without waiting for the topic to come up on the meeting agenda or for their turn to comment.
- » **Informal Setting** – Facilitates one-on-one or small group conversations with staff or technical experts. Allows for an informal exchange of information among participants and staff.
- » **Opportunities for Multiple Questions and Detailed Answers** – Provides citizens ample time to examine displays or educational materials and have staff answer questions immediately.
- » **Direct Interaction with Staff** – Talking to staff can improve understanding. Technical experts provide additional details, reducing misinformation and rumors.
- » **Dialogue** – Promotes conversation rather than confrontation. Talking one-on-one and listening at the open house helps staff better understand public concerns and discuss solutions.
- » **Focuses on Issues, Not Positions** – Citizens can discuss issues with staff and propose solutions. Facilitates and encourages discussion among all participants.
- » **Encourages More Comments** – Provides those uncomfortable speaking in front of a crowd the opportunity to have their questions answered and their comments heard. A transcript of comments will be available on DEP's website after each meeting for those who wish to review all comments.