

UNDERSTANDING SNIPERS AND WAYS TO ENGAGE THEM

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In the arena of community-based planning the term “sniper” refers to a person who opposes a project or policy direction, **and** intentionally holds themselves outside the formal citizen participation process. In some cases snipers have no interest in finding resolution to the issues that are on the agenda. Their sole purpose is to stalemate the decision and create public conflict. In other instances the sniper’s agenda is driven by a desire to challenge institutional direction and change policy direction. They believe their interests are best served by being an independent observer and critic of the process... to keep the public informed and the bureaucrats honest. In either case, snipers cause problems for people leading the process.

In addressing the problem of snipers, first try to understand why they remain outside the formal discussions. It may be they were actually excluded from the process, or they felt they were not welcome. If so, find multiple portals for public participation...invite them to participate...make a seat at the table and listen with an open mind to their concerns.

If they still choose to remain outside the process, identify their key points of contention and determine if their issues can be included within the formal discussions. The simple act of acknowledging the sniper’s opinions can go a long way toward resolving their concerns.

The following are questions you might ask to help develop a sniper response plan.

Who are the snipers? By name? By affiliation? Are they individuals working alone? Loosely organized affiliates? Closely coordinated groups?

What issues do snipers raise? Are their issues salient to the broader community? Are their issues relevant to you? Are their issues relevant to the topics you are addressing? Are their issues tractable?

What do the snipers hope to achieve by their actions? Process stalemate or failure? Increased personal or issue visibility? Personal or corporate pain? Institutional change?

Do they hold credible positions and standing in the broader community? Can they garner wide support for their claims without providing evidence for their positions?

What might you use to draw snipers into the formal public involvement process? If invited to participate, will they accept the invitation?

Are there leaders in the broader community who might challenge the sniper’s agenda? Formally? Informally?