

PLANNING PROGRAM: FROM CHOICE THROUGH ACTION

This committee guide is meant to assist program chairs in their task of increasing member input and involvement in the program process. It outlines how a League can select program issues and offers suggestions about how program chairs can help the League make the necessary hard choices involved in the program process. State Leagues provide excellent assistance in this area. Check to see what publications, training sessions, workshops and other services your state offers on program planning.

CHOOSING PROGRAM

Involve Members Early

Program choice is the first step leading to action. The choices members make demonstrate that they believe an issue is appropriate for League study, member agreement/consensus and action.

Leagues that find ways to involve members early in the program-making process are setting the stage for a good League year. They are ingenious in finding ways to get member suggestions about possible topics or study. They don't depend solely on the unit discussions. Many Leagues use the bulletin to stimulate thinking about the community--a "lively issues" approach. Some Leagues ask several members to write bulletin copy each describing a different local "lively issue." Those members who are stimulated by this exercise, enliven the program-making discussions at unit and annual meetings.

One League announced a Think Tank Day. It invited any member to come, on that day, to the League office to brainstorm on state program. The results appeared in the pre-program-making issue of the Voter. Those involved in the day added spark to discussions on state program in their local Leagues.

Keep the discussions from bogging down on exact wordings. At this stage, members should explore ideas, not semantics. This discussion will reveal what it is that members want to examine about an issue. The final wording as the board presents it should define the proposed study.

Word the Program Choice Carefully

If you are the resource committee chair for the study, you can help members of the board see how the wording of an item sets the limits of the study. Urge that topics be worded as simply and directly as possible.

Members may want a broad study: "Study of parks and recreation programs in Springfield" allows for considerations of all aspects--facilities, administration, financing and programs. On the other hand, members may want to approach only one aspect of an issue: "Study of the financing of public schools in Oak Park" limits the study.

Or members may wish to study a number of issues related to schools--for example, the school lunch program, mental health programs, counseling, extra-curricular activities, special education. If a title lists them all, it is cumbersome; what is more, it may preclude the opportunity to study other services. Members might instead word the study: "Evaluation of special services in the Maplewood Public Schools." This wording leaves the League free to examine the need for special services not presently offered in the Maplewood schools as well as those offered on a regular basis already.

The appropriate board approves the final wording for the issue it wants to recommend at the annual meeting or convention. However, if there is a committee in charge of program-making, it can be of great help by submitting good drafts that encompass in simple language what it has heard the members say they want to study. The recommended program should include the scope:

- the limits of the study,

- areas of possible discussion,
- the possible prospects for action

PLANNING A STUDY

Once a new study is adopted and its scope generally outlined, the “real work” of the committee begins. The chair is usually a member of the board but in some cases a League might use an off-board chair. Small Leagues especially may find it easier to recruit a chair who is not required to assume full board responsibility. The off-board resource committee chair attends those board meetings at which that particular program is discussed, reports progress of the committee's work, indicates needs, and presents those matters which need the board's attention.

Develop a Committee

The chair recruits a committee by observing any signs of interest among members. During the program-making process the chair and others on the board spot those members in units or at the annual meeting who seem to have ideas about the program area. Committees include members of varying talents, with varying amounts of time to give. In larger Leagues, each unit may ask a member to participate in the local study and represent that unit.

A member is more likely to join the committee if there is some indication of what's needed. "I was impressed with what you said during program making time about the parks in Madison. We'd like to have your ideas and help in planning the new study. Or, “You have such good ideas about organizing materials (or writing, approaching people or whatever talent) that we'd like you to serve on our committee for the parks study. It might be profitable to list in the bulletin those already recruited and say, “We need someone who enjoys meeting and talking to governmental officials to complete our parks committee" (or whatever talent you may need).

Those in the community who are not yet members but who have an interest in an issue often join League to be part of the committee. The membership chair may be useful in helping to recruit members for the committee.

Tailor tasks to fit members' time and talents. Not every member has limitless time; nor need every member come to every committee meeting. Someone may be able to keep a clipping file or read and annotate references while another person may be able to attend committee meetings only in the evening. A skillful chair will work out a jigsaw of assignments, personnel and meetings to get the job done, involving each member in some key aspect.

Help Your Committee Succeed

Committee work should be fun as well as educational. The first committee meeting of a new committee should be a lively brainstorming meeting:

- to discuss what the committee ought to know,
- how to find the facts that units will need for a good discussion,
- what sources of information there are in the community,
- who can best help,
- how to begin.

Then each committee member might choose or be assigned an area to explore or some people to see. At the next meeting everyone will have something substantial to contribute.

A chair needs to listen carefully, to lead the committee meetings so that each person's ideas are respected, to see that as much as possible of what people propose is accepted and used and help make every member feel needed and involved. Such attention to people fosters an *esprit de corps*.

Although an orderly outline for a committee meeting is necessary, a chair who is inflexible or who is distressed if committee members introduce ideas not outlined in the agenda turns people off and may lose the interest of the committee.

No one meeting schedule fits every committee or every League. Some Leagues have committees that meet regularly once a month or even every two weeks throughout the year because interest is so high. Schedule, plan, and work with people to reach your goal. Don't try to fit some preconceived outline; changes in timing and scheduling of meetings are inevitable, so check with committee members to avoid as many "no shows" as possible.

DESIGNING DISCUSSION MEETINGS

The committee for a given study:

- directs its efforts toward finding all the information possible;
- sifts out what the committee needs to know in order to discuss alternatives;
- puts together as objectively as possible alternative solutions.

Control the urge to tell everything or to explain everything

In preparation for unit discussions, carefully plan a select package of every member material: printed or mimeographed materials and/or a series of well-written, well-planned bulletin articles--the result of restraint and winnowing. Get this material to members early.

In the discussion meetings, once again, control the urge to tell everything, explain everything. What should happen is a minimum of talking by the committee, a maximum of discussion by members. To make citizen decisions, members needn't be experts.

The purpose of the discussion is to bring out an exchange of ideas, to hone the sharp edges of differences, to allow areas of agreement to emerge. Members need to leave a discussion feeling that they know more, that they have had fun in lively interchange with neighbors and friends and that they can discuss with other citizens a subject that matters. If they are overpowered with detail, members will leave the meeting impressed, but intimidated about their own ability to discuss and to involve others.

Consult With An Experienced Discussion Leader

A skilled discussion leader can help the committee design questions that activate dialogue. "How many acres of park land do we have in Hartford?" is a dead end question. "Do you think we have proper park facilities to supply the recreational needs of the children in our community?" leaves the subject open for discussion. The questions should be worded to stimulate a wide-ranging discussion on various aspects of the issue. The committee supplies factual information as needed.

Learn From Experience

If two unit discussion meetings are planned, the first may give the committee some idea of what added information is needed or what information has not made an impact. Perhaps members really know where the parks are, which neighborhoods have little access, what programs are now provided. Maybe for your next meeting you need a map on which you can present details that members want such as kinds of areas, population, types and sizes of facilities and parks. Perhaps a go-see tour of recreation areas and parks is indicated. Pick up any clues as you go along.

During almost any discussion, the careful listener, and of course, the resource committee members, the recorder and the discussion leader can detect certain areas in which agreement has taken place without a direct question to elicit it.

The discussion leader will recapitulate these tentative agreements. "It seems to me that most of us are saying that there ought to be some small neighborhood parks in the Phillips area. Am I correct?" These areas of agreement should be carefully recorded. They may differ among the units, but time can be saved at a later consensus meeting; the discussion leader can say to the appropriate question, "At our last unit meeting most of the members seemed to think that the Phillips area needs small neighborhood parks. Do you all agree?" Then those not at an earlier meeting have an opportunity to speak. If they agree, the whole earlier discussion need not be repeated. Summarizing as the discussion evolves is an indispensable tool for the discussion leader; it brings the discussion back to focus if the group wanders, if someone is dominating the conversation, or if agreement is obvious.

Many times a tight League schedule will allow for only one meeting on a given study. If so, the bulletin articles and/or every-member materials need especially careful drafting. They must be challenging and provocative; so interestingly written that the member reads and ponders and is motivated to participate.

ARRIVING AT CONSENSUS/FORMULATING A POSITION

Say What You Mean: Mean What You Say

The questions that your committee proposes should be considered by the entire board. The committee has intensively studied the problems, has a reasonable knowledge of the areas within the study where agreement is possible and knows what kinds of action may be foreseeable.

The resulting position should be one on which the League can act effectively. Therefore the questions should elicit an expression of agreement on general concepts not specifics, yet not so bland or general as to be of little value for the board when the time comes to act.

For example, if the study relates to special services in the schools, consensus that the schools should provide more such services is not very useful. On the other hand, agreement that school A should have an additional counselor and school B should have an additional librarian, etc., ties the hands of the League should attendance district changes be made or pupils transferred. More useful would be agreement on kinds of programs, general areas of need, kinds of determinations for how services should be allocated. Then the League is in a position to offer constructive testimony, to select alternatives when actual options come before the community.

Analyze Consensus Reports

Reports from the various units or from the general meeting are analyzed. Some areas of agreement will usually be clear and decisive. On other facets, there may be discernible basic areas of agreement with some disagreement on specifics or tangential areas. The committee phrases what it thinks the members have said and drafts a position statement if the reports warrant agreement. It presents to the board the draft and its evidence from the consensus reports for believing that agreement does indeed exist.

Word the Position Wisely

If agreement is reached in the League in some or all of the areas discussed, the board prepares a short wording of the position and a longer statement that outlines in greater detail the areas of agreement. Hopefully most board members will have attended the discussion meetings and will have input into the final wording based on their experience and on answers the committee chair provides for questions they may ask.

For example, following a study of libraries, members agreed that a new building was needed in a central location; services--either small neighborhood branches or bookmobiles--are needed to bring books to areas too far away from the central library; there should be better cooperation between the

library and the schools, the jail, the hospitals and other institutions; and the book collection should be increased.

The simple support position could read: Support of a new central library which provides for expanded services.

The statement of position then would include both the details and the rationale.

Statement of Position:

The members of the League of Women Voters of Brookfield believe that a new centrally located library building is needed in Brookfield. In order to serve all the citizens, books must be available to all. Therefore, there should be small neighborhood branch facilities or bookmobiles so that access to library books and services is within walking distance of residents.

The book collection should be expanded to meet at least the criteria established for a city the size of Brookfield.

In order to provide reading material for all people in Brookfield, the library should arrange to lend books on an adequate basis to the schools, to people homebound or in hospitals, jails and institutions so that no one able to read is denied access to books from the public library.

Both the rationale--the public library is for everyone and therefore its books should be accessible to all--and some of the specifics are included. Yet the wording does not set the number of books, the specific places that branches or main library should be, nor the exact methods of serving institutions. The board has room to maneuver, to act in support of, or opposition to any specific proposals.

Capitalize on Member Interest

Leagues generate considerable enthusiasm during the study and consensus-reaching process because members have had opportunities for input, for taking part in decision making. And it's essential to create opportunities for the members to maintain their involvement and to contribute to action decisions. For example, shortly after the announcement of the consensus it might be useful to allow time in a meeting for members to discuss, "What can we do to get the kind of library and services we want?" and "What people in our community can give us advice or get the ear of the city government?"

A list should be compiled of possible contacts, which organizations could be enlisted to help and which League members have good action ideas. This information should be presented to the board. Then when the timing is right, the board can draw upon these ideas and enlist the help of specific members and the community leaders or organizations that have been suggested.

Involving members in action decisions may produce two benefits. It is likely that League members whose action ideas were used will help with much more enthusiasm than if they had no part in the planning. The board also has available a reservoir of personnel and useful information for the action effort.

Plan Ahead

The board, with the help of the appropriate committee, is responsible for designing and carrying out any action efforts on an issue. The things to consider when outlining an action strategy include:

- A statement of the overall goal to be achieved. It should be attainable, reasonable, specific, acceptable, flexible, open to reassessment, set within a time frame and measurable.
- Outline tactics for achieving the goal (town meetings, letter writing, testimony, surveys, press conferences, coalitions, etc).
- Determine persons responsible for each area of action--who will coordinate each tactic.
- Assess the timing and political climate for the action.

- Approximate the costs involved in the effort.
- Follow through--establish checkpoints to make sure tactics are being carried out.

Evaluate

Reaching a goal as Leaguers know, can take a very long time. Be sure to evaluate the campaign's successes and shortcomings. There are a number of useful questions that can be asked.

- Was the issue really important to the community? If so, what could have been done to arouse more community support?
- Was the timing correct? If some other issue took the spotlight away from the campaign, could the League have shifted its approach in order to relate its concern to the issue receiving public attention? How?
- Where did the League get the best support? Why? In what parts of the city was the issue defeated? Why? Was it because the issue had no effect on that part of town? Or was it because the League failed to make the issue clear?
- Who publicly opposed? Why? On what was the opposition based? Was the criticism valid? Could some of the opposition have been defused?
- With what other people should the League discuss the effects of the campaign? Media--government officials--allies?
- Was the campaign material too complicated?
- If the League worked with other organizations as a coalition, what happened in the process? Were the right groups together? Did these organizations speak only through their leaders and not through their members? What were the effects when a group or groups in the coalition had to drop out? What means can be used to keep the coalition together? Should it be expanded? How should it be improved?
- How can the enthusiasm of the membership be regenerated in this effort? The League should build on the contacts made and tell members what the positive and negative aspects of the situation are.

The results of such an appraisal, whether or not the League succeeded, can assist in designing a better, more sophisticated effort the next time.

Consider all Avenues for Action

Action can take many forms other than all-out campaigns. Some of the more frequently used and visible forms of action include:

- testimony before city boards, commissions and committees;
- letter-writing campaigns;
- media publicity on issues and their importance;
- public meetings;
- getting out the vote on a ballot issue;
- use of questionnaires;
- getting signatures on initiative petitions;
- increasing use of the courts with a League as plaintiff, intervenor or amicus curiae.

Sometimes innovative action results in more visibility for a problem. For example, suppose a League has a position in support of the city's Master Plan. The League discovers from the observer to the planning commission that a company is asking for an exception in order to develop an area not projected by the Plan as a needed expansion for many years to come. The board evaluates the best means to draw public attention and scrutiny to this request. In publicizing this issue, it may not be politically feasible to oppose it head-on or effective to simply voice opposition at the meeting when the decision is made.

In such a situation one League held a press conference (having had some successful campaigns in the past, it could anticipate good press attendance). At the conference the League simply posed a number of carefully phrased questions: What extra services would be required? How would this development affect the Master Plan?

Because they were pertinent and well designed, the questions received good media coverage. Other citizens began asking questions and much more careful thought was given to the consequences of granting or refusing the exception than the company's request might otherwise have received. The League action created visibility for a most important issue.

Another League involved students in a local computer class in a survey of citizen attitudes toward community services and future needs. First a committee of League members researched, drafted and tested the survey questions. Fifty-eight members, trained in interviewing techniques, conducted the survey. At this point students in a local vocational school, who were enthusiastic about a case study, analyzed and tallied the information gathered in the survey. The League then brought the results to the attention of the City Council and a resolution was passed supporting the League's survey.

With imagination and verve Leagues can not only generate enthusiastic member involvement in a specific campaign, but also create among their members the awareness that action can be successful; that goals can be accomplished. The certainty that change can take place will aid members in surviving a temporary setback or defeat and will challenge member thinking on how to approach the problem more effectively next time.

Testimony

When the opportunity presents itself and the board decides to testify on a problem, the appropriate committee chair often drafts or helps in drafting League testimony. It may be presented by the League president or by the board member considered best able to answer questions.

Testimony should be as creative and interesting as possible and there are several helpful techniques to assure that the League statement has maximum impact.

Opening the testimony with a punchy headline or key sentence is more likely to get the attention of the governing board or commission before which the League is appearing, than an explanation of why the League is testifying. This body is probably not interested in how long the League has studied the issue, the exact wording of consensus, or in-League procedures. If necessary, such matters can be handled with a phrase later on such as "As a result of long and intensive study, League members believe . . ." Only the most pertinent facts and conclusions (supported by any appropriate attached materials) should be included in the main body of the testimony.

The best approach is to present copies of the written testimony ahead of time to all the members of the committee or board and to the news media. The copies should be well-written, double spaced and neat in appearance. The League spokesperson should then cover the principal points the League wants to make instead of reading the full testimony. The abbreviated, oral testimony needs to be pungent and should challenge the commission member to read the full text. The shorter time required to read the testimony will allow for more discussion. It is unlikely, however, that the League testimony in and of itself, will convert the commission to the League's position. The testimony will need to be supplemented with other action. Letters to the committee or commission members from the membership, telephone calls, personal urging from League and non-League people in the community whose help the League has enlisted, are necessary back-ups.

The Bulletin

Part of the excitement for the member is awareness of League impact and knowledge of League successes. Very often the success stories are so hidden in the bulletin that only careful reading discloses them. An Action box in the Bulletin, with news of recent successes as well as upcoming events, might help.

All citizens have a stake in public decisions, the right to consider how such decisions will affect them and the right to make their own thinking known--they do not have to be experts. As Barbara Ward has said: Never be paralyzed by the complexity of the problems so that you don't have a view. People with no knowledge of the facts do not have this reticence about having a view.

The League's program process--selection, adoption, study, consensus, position, action--provides a sound basis for gaining "knowledge of the facts" for expressing member agreement and working to achieve action goals on a complex variety of issues in today's world.