



Frequently Asked Questions

■ What is a Community Advisory Team (CAT)?

The CAT is a group of concerned members of the public that is formed to assist public officials by researching, reviewing, analyzing and advising them on issues impacting the community. Through its use of proactive public participation principles, you have an unprecedented opportunity to have your concerns heard and presented to your public officials about matters affecting your community.

■ What is proactive public participation?

“Proactive” is the operative word. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as “creating or controlling a situation by causing something to happen rather than responding to it after it has happened;” from Merriam Webster, “acting in anticipation of future problems, needs, or changes;” and the Cambridge Dictionary says, “taking action by causing change and not only reacting to change when it happens.” This is accomplished by working with others and having access to inner governmental proceedings.

■ How does regular participation differ?

With regular participation, public hearings are held (often after decisions are already made) with time limited testimony before a final vote is taken. Multiple choice questionnaires are tabulated and open responses summarized, which dilutes their meaning. — Proactive participation begins upfront, with opportunities to actively inquire and provide your input well before decisions are made.

■ Where has this been done before?

At Pittsburgh’s 6-county regional transportation planning agency. It so impressed the US Federal Highway Administration that they used it as their example of excellence in public participation when working with communities across the country.

■ What worked well then & what didn’t?

Good: Staff provided information and briefings. Participant self-selection and no size limit brought expertise and challenging points of view, enabling some to identify and report major fraud.

Not good: The process was not created through a referendum, enabling officials to eliminate it after exposure of the fraud. Also some people pursued personal financial interests versus the public good.

■ What critical lessons were learned?

An official proactive public participation process must be created via a voter referendum to protect it from official retaliation. There must also be a conflict of interest provision for participants.



■ What constitutes a conflict of interest?

Basically, conflicts of interest exist when people get or hope to get monetary or material benefits from something about which they are going to offer their analysis or advice. Such conflicts may be temporary or ongoing, which an Ethics Committee of the CAT can evaluate on a case by case basis to assess when a person may or may not participate.



■ Who can join & participate in the CAT?

Residents (home owners and all renters). Non-resident property owners and business operators have a stake in the community too, so they can also participate but with some restrictions.

■ Who picks the CAT member/participants?

You choose whether you participate. Others, too, are self-selected and can participate provided they have no active or pending conflicts of interest.

■ How many can join and participate?

There is no size limit. The more, the better. The process has proven effective with less than a dozen to over a thousand member/participants.

■ Whom does the CAT advise?

It can advise Council members and other public officials who request information or advice. It can also inform and advise the general public about matters which could affect them.

■ How do other advisory bodies compare?

Other advisory bodies have a small number of appointees chosen by officials. Usually they are assigned a topic or subject, and the advice tends to fit a set agenda. — In contrast, CAT membership and its size are open ended. While it may be asked to advise on a specific matter, it can also pursue concerns independently. It can develop, propose, and advocate for legislation on issues of concern and organize public support to get bills passed.

■ Who runs the CAT and how does it work?

CAT participants run it in coordination with Council members whom they assist, taking into account their needs and concerns. Robert's Rules of Order (which the government also uses) is its parliamentary guide. They meet, elect officers, and form committees to research and draft positions for the CAT's final report that is provided to one or more Council members, to the whole Council, and/or to the public. It can also conduct various activities in its work to engage the public.

■ Are all points of view represented?

To guarantee that everybody can feel included and be confident their concerns are heard, where there may be some disagreement with a majority held position, a minority report may be drafted and attached. For its inclusion with a final report, only a small fraction of the participants need to consent without that indicating they concur with it.

■ Is assistance for the CAT available?

Yes, technical, logistical, & some financial assistance is available for it.

■ How can I help make it more effective?

While it would be best to have a structure for proactive public participation in the Home Rule Charter, that did not happen. But, you can join the CAT, work with it now, and eventually we can get an Open Government Amendment with it passed.

 **It's your Community Advisory Team!**



You are invited

Learn what is going on in our community.
Tell us what you want to see be done.
Propose solutions to community problems.
Just keep yourself informed or join in and help make things happen.
Minimal time needed for active involvement.

It's free & easy to participate

Contact us. We hope to hear from you.

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Pittsburgh Council District 2

Community Advisory Team



FAQ

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