

NEIGHBORHOOD GUIDE TO ORGANIZING A CANDIDATE FORUM

provided by

League of Women Voters of Nashville & Nashville Neighborhood Alliance, Inc.

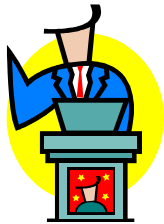
Why should we host a Candidates Forum?

The votes that we cast in the election booth are important decisions that, in most cases, we live with for 2, 4, or 6 years to come. These decisions almost always have an impact on the livability of our neighborhood, the health and safety of our family, and quite possibly our own individual future.

It is important that we work to ensure that all of our neighbors are encouraged to participate in elections in an educated and thereby meaningful way. It is not good enough to just go out there and push the button of the candidate whose name we recognize, or who shook our hand at the 4th of July Celebration – we must make decisions based upon the candidates qualifications, record of community and/or public service, and their stated and written responses to questions and issues that we in the neighborhoods find important.



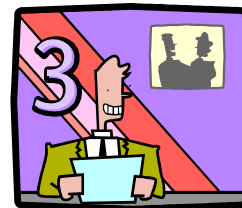
Make informed choices



Get commitments from the candidates

A well-planned and executed candidates forum can help us to help our neighbors make the most of their right to vote. It will assist your neighborhood group in getting to know potential decision makers and to identify individuals who are suited to meet the needs of your community. It is also an opportunity to get commitments from all the candidates so that, no matter who wins the election, the group can urge the winner to keep his/her promises once s/he is in office.

In addition, your neighborhood organization may benefit from the exposure you receive from holding a forum, both to the general public as well as to current and future elected officials. Candidates either have, or will learn to, respect groups that are trying to ensure that voters get involved in greater numbers and with greater insight.



Greater visibility for your group to the community and to the candidates

Things to consider prior to moving forward:

Please remember that candidate forums are a challenging and exciting aspect of politics. Face-to-face meetings between candidates, whether in a meeting hall or via television or radio, are a hallmark of many elections.



Be a part of something exciting

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Forums involve thorough planning and hard work

If you decide to have a candidate meeting, success will depend on thorough planning, good judgment in selecting the format, even-handed treatment of candidates, careful attention to the content, mechanics and conduct of the meeting, and hard but rewarding work.

There are many ways to present candidates to the voters. To be successful, you must decide as an organization to commit the volunteer time needed to plan and implement the forum. One way to help you decide is to read through this guide in its entirety. Once you do that representatives of both the NNA and the LWV would be happy to talk with you about any specific questions that you may have.



This guide holds a lot of useful info – read it all!

You've only got one chance to get it right!

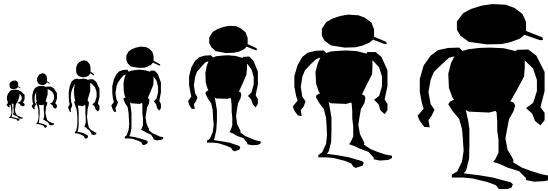


The tips in this guide are drawn from extensive experience on how to hold a forum including planning, cooperation with other groups, treatment of candidates, format and mechanics. We have been quite specific because a candidate meeting cannot be "proofread" - it has to be right the first time.

Planning a Neighborhood-led Election Forum

First Steps

Your first step in planning for the event is to look over the pre-election situation. Consider:



Will enough people help plan and attend the event?

- Can you get the needed help from volunteers to do the work involved?
- Will your neighborhood respond and turn out for a candidate meeting?

- Can you get the cooperation of the candidates? Will date and place affect their response?
- Are there other organizations that will cooperate with or assist you?
- Will the media cover the meeting? Newspapers? TV? Radio?



Will other players cooperate with your group?

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Once you've thought all these factors through:

1. Pick a date for your meeting
2. Clear the proposed date with candidates
3. Reserve your location as soon as possible

Collaborating with Others

It will probably be very helpful for neighborhood groups to work with other neighborhood groups in their area/district to host a candidates forum. A collaboration can mean an obvious payoff in help for planning the meeting and carrying it off, in drawing a larger audience to attend it (an appealing plus to candidates) and in increased financing and in-kind contributions that are helpful to make your event a success.

When selecting whom you should consider collaborating with, your group might want to consider these things:

Are there groups from your area that share your goals?

Will they be willing to work with you in partnership?



- Is the group in the same political district?
- Do we have a positive experience working with this group?
- Does this group endorse or oppose individual candidates?
- Do we want to include other groups, like business associations, that may have differing issues?

If you decide to secure the assistance of other groups, hold a planning session with representatives of all co-sponsors. An early start in planning how to share responsibilities helps guarantee success. Collaborating groups should continue to send representatives to all meetings and be in on all decision making.

There should be a clear identification of what contribution a collaborating organization will make such as providing:

- A substantial number of volunteers to help do the work - e.g., making and distributing posters and serving as ushers at the meeting
- Access to a better meeting place
- Additional publicity for the meeting
- Additional funds for financing the meeting
- Increased assistance with reaching out to and working with the media.



Do you want to collaborate with others? Why?

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List of Candidates

Even if you know who all of the candidates are for any given office – it is a good idea to get the “official” list of candidates including their address. You should be able to get this by contacting the Davidson County Election Commission at 862-8800. Just ask them for a list of names, addresses and telephone numbers of the candidates – they can probably even provide this to you in the form of an electronic spreadsheet.

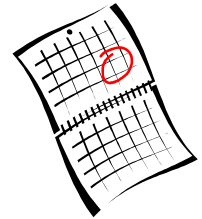
Invite All The Candidates Or Just The “Frontrunners”?

In some political races, large numbers of candidates qualify to be on the ballot. This sometimes presents a logistical problem for event organizers. Can you imagine trying to hold a candidates forum with all 20 candidates for Council at Large? But how do you as a group determine who should and who shouldn't be invited?

The League of Women Voters can help you by identifying a reasonable set of objective criteria that will narrow the group to a rational number. Ultimately, this is your decision. Once you decide on objective criteria, however, you must remain consistent in order to ensure fairness to all candidates. In most cases this is not an issue as there are seldom more than half a dozen individuals running for any one office.

Picking a Date

Pick the best possible time for your meeting to assure a large audience and high candidate participation. After selecting a tentative date, check around to make sure that a big community event has not already been scheduled for the dates being considered. If possible, check your date against a community calendar. You might also check out the availability of likely meeting sites.



Make sure you pick a date that doesn't conflict with other key community events!

It is highly desirable to clear the date informally by telephone with the candidates themselves and confirm the conversation with a letter. Remember the goal is to have all of the candidates present at the same time!

Picking a Meeting Place

Is your meeting place accessible to all the people in your neighborhood?



Once the date is set, nail down the place. Things to consider include size, convenience, facilities, rental fee, parking and access to equipment. If signing a contract, carefully check out all details – lighting and sound systems, tables, podiums and audience microphones, taping facilities, etc. Verify a closing time.

Arrange to have the meeting place opened so that your committee can do ground work a few hours before the meeting. Use that time to brief the meeting moderator, host-hostesses and ushers, timekeepers, screening committee and press section on the platform set-up and the locations of fire exits, coatrooms, restroom and public telephones. Someone on the building staff completely familiar with the sound and lighting equipment should be there an hour before the meeting to check it.

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Publicity



Be creative in thinking about ways to get the word out & start early!

Wide and effective publicity - a veritable barrage for several weeks before the event - is a must for drawing an audience for any kind of candidate meeting. Contact all of the media outlets early. If appropriate, prepare timed spot announcements for radio and television. If the meeting is going to be broadcast, the stations may provide some free publicity. For newspapers, try letters to the editor, news releases or paid advertisements. Ask community organizations to inform their members.

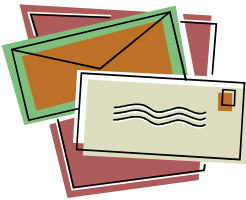
Appoint people to make phone calls, write letters, make arrangements with printers, distribute information, or whatever is necessary for the publicity you plan. In planning publicity, consider how much money you can spend and what people you are trying to reach. Some possibilities are:

- Announcements in the collaborating groups newsletters
- Flyers distributed door-to-door by local groups
- Radio and television public service announcements
- Posters on store windows, local library, community center, etc.
- News releases (check deadline dates for the papers you would use)
- Radio call-in shows
- Announcements through other organizations including faith based



Do you have a strategy for turning out people to your forum?

Invitations



Tell them who, where, when, why and HOW!

The invitations to the candidates should clearly state the following:

- The exact date, time and place
 - The purpose of the meeting and the offices and candidates to be included
 - The format to be followed
 - The names of all participating organizations
- Explicit provisions for replying, asking the candidates to reply within a week or ten days. If no answer has been received by that time, repeat the invitation by telephone and ask for a written acceptance or regrets. Even then, you may run into last-minute no-shows.
 - Ground rules: the time limit, the nature of the candidate's presentation, and the opportunity for rebuttal and question periods, if planned. Remember to tell the candidates from the very outset that no substitute speakers will be permitted, unless your planning committee decides otherwise.

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Send Follow-up Letters

Confirming letters giving detailed arrangements and repeating the date, time, place of the meeting and directions should be sent to each accepting candidate. Explain ground rules and the timed breakdown of the agenda so the candidates will know when to arrive (ask them to arrive at least ten minutes before they are scheduled to speak) and when they can leave.



There are few things more important than providing and getting things in writing!



Do you want to limit or prohibit campaign material?

If desired, you can also ask for biographical material to be used in a printed program for the event. You may want to ask for a formal resume' from each of them – maybe even specifying the format yourselves.

You probably want to include a policy regarding campaign material (signs, flyers, cards, etc.) at the event site. The simplest rule is to not allow any campaign material at the event. But in any case be specific.

Physical Set-Up

Visit the chosen location and mentally walk through the event. Decide on what is needed and who is responsible to provide:

- 1) Placement of candidates - table, podium, skirt for table, etc.
- 2) Placement of moderator
- 3) Public Address System - either enough microphones at table or one microphone at the podium where each candidate can take a turn speaking
- 4) Sign in sheets and name tags
- 5) Placement of time-keepers
- 6) Literature table - whose? what? where?
- 7) Coffee, water, soda, etc.
- 8) Name cards in front of candidates on table—print names on both sides to be visible by moderator as well as by audience
- 9) Miscellaneous details: water - glasses and pitcher for moderator and candidates, cards for questions, stop watches, greeters, gavel
- 10) Timecards - different colors forewarning end of a speaker's time limit (usually "1 minute", "30 seconds" on yellow and "STOP " on red)



Making sure that candidates can easily be seen and heard and that everyone is comfortable are all keys to a successful forum!

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Program



Providing the audience with programs and other good visuals will help to keep them interested and engaged.

A printed program is of great assistance to those attending the forum. It can be as simple as a typed and copied sheet with the names of all the participants, the format for the meeting, and brief information about the candidates.

It could include the biographies or résumés that all candidates have provided. You might want to include a listing of polling times and locations, notice of the collaborating partners, identification of financial and in-kind sponsors and even contact information for the respective candidates campaigns.

Afterward

When the meeting is over:

- Write a letter of thanks to each candidate, to the press, to cooperating organizations and others helping to make the forum a success.
- Compile a detailed overall report to be used as an evaluation and as background for future community meetings.

Holding a Neighborhood-Led Candidates Forum

THE PLAYERS

The Moderator

In choosing a moderator, consideration should be given to the selection of a moderator from outside of the boundary of the district represented by the candidates.

A moderator should be aware of the personalities or issues in the election that might cause any difficulties; be able to make quick decisions; have a good sense of humor; be absolutely fair; be able to prevent a candidate from taking more than a fair share of time or from bringing personalities into the meeting.

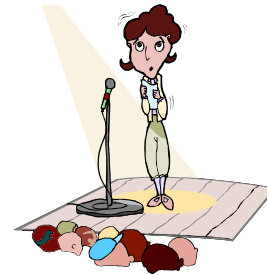
Whoever you choose, make sure that the moderator has all of the necessary information (in writing) a week in advance. You should also include ballot explanations if these are likely to come up.



A good moderator can make or break the quality of your forum.

What are some of the qualities you should look for in a moderator?

What are some of the qualities you should avoid in your search for a moderator?



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GUIDELINES FOR MODERATORS

- 1) Be as fair as you possibly can. Be gracious, calm, remember the purpose – to have candidates present themselves and their positions. It is helpful to be as informed as possible about the people and issues involved.
- 2) Decide how you will address the candidates (Tom Jones, Mr. Jones, etc.) and bring this list with you. Also bring extra paper on which to write the names in the order they will speak.
- 3) Arrive early and meet each candidate before the meeting starts. Clarify pronunciation of names. If necessary, write their names phonetically on your list. Have each candidate draw a number; write it on your list so you are sure to call for opening statements in proper order.
- 4) Some moderators stand at a podium, some sit with or near the candidates. If a panel of questioners is used, the moderator may choose to sit with them. Be sure the audience can see and hear you at all times.
- 5) Announce the candidates one at a time to give their opening statements. Give just their names - candidates may give biographical material if they wish in their allotted time. Speakers may have to come to the podium mike. If not, encourage them to stand with the table mike for more impact. Enforce time limits. You may have to interrupt a speaker at the end of a sentence. (Quickly say, "Thank you," before the start of the next sentence.) It is not fair to allow one speaker extra time when the others are obeying the rules.
- 6) After opening statements have been given explain again how questions will be handled. If questions are taken directly from the audience, remind the audience that all speeches and statements of position should come from the candidates; the audience must confine itself to asking pertinent questions. Announce that each person may ask but one question until all have had an opportunity to ask questions. Also, each questioner must identify himself and direct the question to a specific candidate. State the time at which the forum will end and then accept the first question. If there is no amplification available for the questioners, the moderator should repeat each question for the audience and the candidates.
- 7) At the end of the meeting, thank all the people involved - timekeepers, sponsoring groups, candidates and other workers. Remind everyone to vote giving the date of the election and the hours of the polls. Clarify what will be on the ballot on Election Day. Announce whether candidates are available after the meeting for further questions.



At times, the role of moderator can be a bit like directing traffic. She may have to be forceful yet graceful.

The Sorting Committee

If you decide to provide the audience with cards for questions, you will need a sorting committee. The committee should have three to five members. All co-sponsors should be invited to have a representative.

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GUIDELINES FOR QUESTION SORTING COMMITTEE

- 1) At the meeting distribute cards for questions. Cards larger than 3 x 5 are easier to read. These may be placed on the chairs before the meeting, handed out as people enter, and/or given out at an appointed time.
- 2) Be prepared with several questions on the issues – use these prepared questions for starters, while the committee sorts the questions from the general audience..
- 3) Each committee member should take a number of questions, read through them and divide them by:



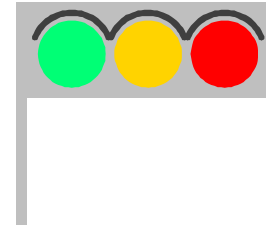
- A) Inappropriate
- B) Good general questions
- C) Good questions to specific candidates

Combine the previous categories:

- A) Best general questions on top
- B) Questions to specific candidates - put in order so that candidates have questions in turn. If necessary, address some to different candidates but note the original name on the card so that the moderator can be sure that candidate has an opportunity to answer.

Duties of the Forum Timekeeper

- 1) Prepare a large card that reads "30 SEC!" and one that reads "STOP". The 30-second card is to be used to inform candidates that they have 30 seconds remaining to speak.
- 2) Sit in the front row and keep accurate time.
- 3) If a candidate does not seem to see the STOP card, stand.
- 4) Prepare numbered slips of paper. Before the forum begins, assemble the candidates and have them draw for speaking order. Write the names in the speaking order determined and give to the moderator.



If the moderator's job is like directing traffic, it is the timekeeper's job to assist him by acting as the traffic signal.

Duties of the Forum Host(ess)

- 1) Prepare nametags and/or name plates for the table for candidates.
- 2) Greet candidates, take care of coats, hats, etc.; show them where campaign material can be displayed.
- 3) Introduce each candidate to the moderator and timekeeper and the presidents of the sponsoring organizations, if appropriate.
- 4) Greet members of the press and give assistance as needed.

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Candidates will be more likely to remember and respect the ground rules if you remind them of the rules at the beginning in front of the audience.

Guidelines for Candidates

- 1) Presentations and questions should be confined strictly to issues.
- 2) Substitutes or spokesmen for candidates will not be permitted.
- 3) Order of speaking shall be determined by drawing numbers.
- 4) Each candidate may speak for a designated number of minutes in an opening statement.
- 5) Timekeepers will keep close watch on time limits. They will sit in the front row and signal with 30 seconds and STOP cards.
- 6) If the groups decided to allow it, campaign material can be made available at a designated spot in the back of the room, but may not be distributed before or during the forum.

SAMPLE MEETING FORMAT

- 1) **Call to order** (on time), introductions, opening comments made by host/hostess or moderator. Include:
 - A) Members of the coalition sponsoring forum
 - B) Explanation of absences, if any
 - C) Description of format of meeting - timekeeping, order of speaking (decided by random draw prior to meeting), explanation of question cards and procedure for question period.
- 2) **Presentation by candidates:** Permit each candidate a specified time to make an initial speech, and make sure that candidates know time limit prior to the meeting. You only need to allow three to five minutes for this, since experience has shown that this is all the time needed to lay out a candidate's key positions.
- 3) **Question Period:** There are several ways to handle this part of the meeting. You may devote the period entirely to questions from the floor, put to the candidates by the general public, or you may have a panel of questioners comprised of members of the sponsoring organizations.
- 4) **Handling Questions from the Floor:** To ensure fairness and good order during your question period you need to work out in advance the method you will follow, and this is the method you will explain to the audience at the beginning of the general question period.
 - A) If you are using a large hall and expect large attendance, you may wish to use microphones so that both questioners and candidates can be heard. Station an usher at the microphones to ensure that no questioner exceeds his/her rights or common courtesy. (Getting access to a microphone and a captive audience sometimes invites a long-winded and occasionally impassioned speech rather than a question by a member of the audience.)

You may wish to announce at the opening of the questioning period that the lines may form in both aisles and that the moderator will recognize questioners alternatively.

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- B) An alternative method of questioning is one that requires all questions from the audience to be put in writing. It helps to have several ushers in the aisles to collect these written questions and to have representatives from the organization(s), perhaps seated at a table to the side, who can sort through the questions and eliminate duplicates as well as any highly subjective questions. This has proven to be an effective way to manage the questioning process!

Whatever method of questioning you choose to follow in your candidate meeting, it is essential that you devise a system to distribute the questions equitably.

- Don't always give questions in the same order, to candidates A, B, C and so on. This would always permit candidate A to have first crack at every question and candidate G would always be the last to speak to a question.
- Rotate questions among the candidates so that each will be the first at answering some questions, and also each will be at the middle and each at the end of the question-order.



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This document is a work in progress. If you find that you still have questions, please let us know. If, from your experience, there are subjects not included that you believe should be, please contact us and tell us about it.

The Neighborhoods Resource Center is available to provide your neighborhood group with assistance in holding a forum or just getting involved more in the election process.

Don't have a neighborhood group? If you would like to start one, we can assist you with that as well! Give Carol McCullough (cmccullough@tnrc.net) a call at:



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