

## **Consensus Building Approach (CBA)**

### **Overview: Consensus Building Approach**

The Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) conducts business using the Consensus Building Approach (CBA) that BPAC established with principles and guidance from the book *Breaking Robert's Rules* by Lawrence E. Susskind and Jeffrey L. Cruikshank. This process was adopted because BPAC Members desire a process for conducting meetings and making decisions that takes the most important concerns of all participants into account.

Consensus building involves dialogue and deliberation among Members leading to cumulative proposals that address the concerns of all parties.

When proposals are presented, the question is asked: "Can you live with this? If not, what would you change so you can live with it?" Persons engaging in the Consensus Building Approach (CBA) have a positive obligation to improve the package that is put on the table if they don't like it. The changes made to the package must make the package go from unacceptable to acceptable – not just for them, but for everyone in the group.

Consensus does not mean unanimity. While the Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) will certainly strive for unanimity in its decision-making, the CBA allows BPAC to settle for "overwhelming agreement" in cases where unanimity is not attainable.

There are five steps in the Consensus Building Approach.

### **Step 1: Convening**

BPAC Members are selected and meetings are scheduled as specified in the Bylaws. BPAC Members must agree overwhelmingly to use CBA and believe in the process for CBA to be effective.

### **Step 2: Assigning Roles and Responsibilities**

The Chair, Vice-Chair, Subcommittee Chairs, and Secretary are selected in a process specified in the Bylaws.

The Chair, or Vice-Chair in the absence of the Chair, fulfills the Facilitator role in the CBA process. The Secretary fulfills the role of Recorder in the CBA process and is responsible for preparing meeting minutes as specified in the Bylaws. Under the CBA, the meeting minutes are not attributed to individuals.

### **Step 3: Facilitating Group Problem Solving**

This step involves generating mutually advantageous proposals and confronting disagreements in a respectful way. Effective problem solving draws upon the best available information and ensures that a range of possible solutions are considered in an effort to do everything possible to meet the concerns of all participants.

BPAC works effectively by creating ad hoc subcommittees to work on different aspects of BPAC's mission. The procedure for the creation and operation of subcommittees is specified in the Bylaws. Subcommittees engage in joint fact-finding, collaboratively

brainstorm solutions, and draft written proposals for consideration by BPAC Members under the CBA. Proposals will be distributed to BPAC Members at least one week prior to the meeting in which they will be considered.

#### **Step 4: Reaching Agreement**

“Deciding” isn’t as simple as “voting.” It’s about coming as close as possible to meeting the most important interests of everyone concerned, and documenting how and why an agreement was reached. Each Member agrees to fully and consistently **participate in the process unless the Member withdraws**. If participants are thinking of withdrawing, they agree to explain their reasons for doing so and to give the others a chance to accommodate their concerns.

When a written package proposal is presented to BPAC Members, every Citizen Representative and every Institutional Advisor Representative in attendance is asked “Can you live with this proposal?”

**Consensus is reached** when the participants agree that they can “live with” the package being proposed. Some participants may not agree completely with every feature of the package as proposed, but they do not disagree enough to warrant opposition to the whole package.

If a participant cannot “live with” the package being proposed, it is the responsibility of the dissenter to provide an alternative that improves the written package in a way that makes the package go from unacceptable to acceptable, not only for the dissenter but all participants.

**Unanimity is not required to reach consensus.** CBA requires “overwhelming agreement,” which is defined as “unanimity minus 2.” If two or fewer BPAC Members present cannot “live with” the proposal, consensus will be assumed after a good faith effort is made to accommodate dissenters’ concerns in a way that is acceptable to everyone.

The following scale may be used periodically by the Facilitator to test whether consensus has been reached. **Using straw votes**, participants express their level of comfort and commitment by indicating:

- a. Wholeheartedly agree
- b. Good idea
- c. Supportive
- d. Reservations – would like to talk
- e. Serious concerns—must talk
- f. Cannot be part of the decision—must block it

If all participants fall between *a* and *c*, consensus on the item is assumed. When someone falls between *d* and *f*, that person must state concerns clearly and offer a constructive alternative.

In the event the Facilitator determines consensus cannot be reached, the Facilitator may invoke the **fallback option**, a super majority vote. A super majority is defined as 75% of Citizen Representatives in attendance. The fallback option may be invoked only by the Facilitator and only after a good faith effort has been made to reach consensus.

In-person attendance by BPAC Members is required to participate in a consensus test that will result in an official BPAC decision.

A quorum must be met before an official and binding BPAC decision-making consensus test can be finalized. A quorum is defined as 51% of the Citizen Representatives.

When calculating a quorum or super majority, a decimal number result must be rounded up to the nearest whole number. For example, if a 75% super majority is calculated on a 19-member committee, the result of 14.25, would be rounded up to 15, meaning 15 committee members would make a 75% super majority.

#### **Step 5: Holding Parties to Their Commitments**

When necessary, final written agreements may be presented to Institutional Advisors and other authoritative bodies. In the event the Institutional Advisors and other authoritative bodies cannot live with a package, BPAC will reconvene to modify the package in a way that is acceptable not only to the Institutional Advisors and other authoritative bodies, but to everyone else as well.

Once consensus is reached on the revised proposal, it is presented again to the Institutional Authorities and other authoritative bodies for action and implementation.

### Ground Rules for CBA

Each BPAC Member agrees to follow these ground rules:

- Only one person will speak at a time, and no one will interrupt when another person is speaking.
- Citizen Representatives agree to candidly identify and represent, to the best of their ability, the interests of members of the bicycling and pedestrian community. Some Citizen Representatives may represent the interests of subsets of the bicycling and pedestrian community, such as students or persons with disabilities.
- Each person will express their own views, rather than speaking for others at the table or attributing motives to them.
- Each person will avoid grandstanding (i.e., making extended comments or asking repeated questions), so that everyone has a fair chance to speak and to contribute.
- No one will make personal attacks. Participants agree to challenge ideas, not people. If a personal attack is made, the Facilitator will ask the participants to refrain from personal attacks. If personal attacks continue, the Facilitator may ask the group to take a break to “cool off.”
- Each person will make every effort to stay on track with the agenda and to move the deliberations forward.
- Each person will seek to focus on the merits of what is being said, making a good faith effort to understand the concerns of others. Clarifying questions are encouraged; rhetorical questions and disparaging comments are discouraged.
- Each person will seek to follow a “no surprises” rule—voicing concerns whenever they arise. In this way, no one will be taken off-guard late in the deliberations when someone suddenly raises an objection.
- Each person will seek to identify options or proposals that represent common ground, without glossing over or minimizing legitimate disagreements. Each participant agrees to do their best to take account of the interests of the group as a whole.
- Each person reserves the right to disagree with any proposal and accepts responsibility for offering alternatives that accommodate their own interests as well as the interests of others.
- Institutional Advisory Representatives agree to keep the Institution they represent informed about the issues and options under discussion and to seek the input and advice of their Institution when necessary.
- No Member may make public statements on behalf of other participants or the group as a whole until consensus is reached. Citizen Members and Institutional Advisor Representatives may speak on behalf of BPAC once consensus has been reached and as long as they accurately represent that consensus.

