

XI. Let Your Voice Be Heard!



Culminating Activity – Simulated Public Hearing Lesson Plan

XI. Let Your Voice Be Heard! – Culminating Activity

10.1 Introduction

Decision makers in Virginia – legislators and government officials – are frequently called upon to make decisions on complex and often controversial issues affecting the environment. They frequently hold public hearings to give a forum to interest groups and to assess public feelings on those issues. Decision makers receive input from their constituents – individuals, coalitions of people or organizations banding together to make their voices stronger, and from interest groups who share a common view. Usually there are many different interests (often called stakeholders) represented at public hearings.

The simulation activities outlined here are models of some real life issues or situations faced by localities in which our students live. By taking part in the simulation, students will gain experience in examining problems, weighing facts, and presenting views on issues. They may also experience the heated emotions that sometimes coincide with controversial issues!

Objectives

Students will:

- Identify a public policy problem in their community;
- Gather and evaluate information on the problem from a variety of sources;
- Examine and evaluate policies designed to deal with the problem;
- Develop proposed policy to deal with the problem;
- Experience the process of making decisions about complex issues; and,
- Formulate and articulate opinions about an issue based on facts.



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10.2 Activity

Classes will participate in a simulated public hearing before a legislative body in which the students use the information they have gathered as the basis for oral presentations judged by the legislature. Students take on roles as constituents involved in the problem/issue. Groups present testimony to the legislative body role-playing the different constituent groups affected. The legislature then makes a decision based on the testimony they have heard. An alternative could be having students role playing before a guest legislator from their locality who then will meet with students following the simulation to compare the simulation to an actual hearing

Procedure

- Choose a current topic of environmental concern specific to your community. Below is a list and description of possible topics for each region of Virginia, along with suggested constituent interest groups.
- Assign students evenly into groups representing constituent interest groups (for example, parents, youth, environmental groups, business, manufacturing, farming, etc...). One group should be the legislators who will listen to the arguments and then make a decision.
- Allow students time to research positions based on their roles and to prepare a short presentation (3-5 minutes) for the public hearing. To aid their research, students should read the *Geographic Overview of Virginia's Natural Resources* and any of the relevant *Windows: Energy; Water; Air; Agriculture; Forestry and Wildlife; Land Use and Natural Hazards; Green Building*.
- Each of the groups should tell the legislators how they think the legislators should vote on the issue. Groups should have a primary spokesperson. While the groups are preparing their testimony, the legislators should brainstorm questions to ask each group.
- Arrange the room with a table at the front of the room where the legislators will sit. Groups should be called upon for their testimony. Legislators may ask questions to clarify the group's presentation of its position. A student or teacher should act as a timekeeper to make sure testimony doesn't exceed 3-5 minutes.
- After all groups have presented, the legislators should discuss the problem and decide what action to take. Only the legislators should speak.
- A rubric is attached for scoring the presentations of each interest group.

Variations

- Conduct the mock hearing in front of the whole school or grade level.
- Videotape the hearing. Watch it later for a group discussion about the different arguments and the decision made.
- Have the interest groups make signs with slogans that convey their opinions.
- Have students write newspaper articles covering the hearing. Articles should include information on all the positions presented and the decision made.
- Have students conduct a survey of classmates about the issue. Based on the data from the survey have students write a recommendation for further action.

Scoring Sheet

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Topic of debate: _____

Name of constituent group: _____

Criteria	Rating 1-10	Comments
Appearance of Team		
Opening Statements (well organized, visuals, etc . . .)		
Team members addressed remarks to legislators – not to audience		
Opening statements not read from cards		
Students spoke loudly enough to be heard		
Points were specific to issue under discussion		
Students confidently answer questions from legislators		
Points were well thought out		
Respect was shown throughout the debate		
All team members participated in either presentation or preparation		
Total points		

Current Issues

Northern Virginia Region

Future Public Land Use

Farmland has been purchased by your locality to be used for the common good. What do you want to do with this property – build badly needed sports facilities, develop a nature refuge, build a needed elementary school, or sell it to a developer for a residential subdivision development?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Recreation Sports League
- Sierra Club/Audubon Society
- Homebuilders Association
- Parent Teacher Associations

Location of New Shopping Center near a Civil War Battlefield Site

A national chain of superstores wants to buy land and build a new shopping center on land that has been designated as part of a Civil War Battlefield. Is there a historic significance to this property and is it valuable enough that the government should buy the land and preserve it? Should the landowner have a right to sell the land to whomever he/she chooses?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Landowners Rights groups
- Civil War Preservation Society
- The landowner
- Chamber of Commerce
- Shopping Center Association

Landfill near Your Neighborhood

Your county wants to build a municipal landfill for the disposal of waste from your community. There is no public water supply in the region where they want to locate the landfill. Everyone relies on wells. The alternative to the landfill is a large expensive transfer station where trash is trucked to a neighboring community. Utility fees will increase with the transfer station alternative but will stay the same if the landfill is built. What do you do?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Taxpayers Association
- Homeowners Associations
- Rural Water Association
- Environmental Organizations

Coastal Plain Region

Change in Agriculture Regulations for Application of Fertilizers on Cropland

The state wants to change the regulations for the use of fertilizers on croplands because of pollution concerns in the Chesapeake Bay. The change in regulations may cause small farmers to go out of business because of increased costs. What do you think?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Farm Bureau
- Chesapeake Bay Foundation
- Fertilizer Producers Trade groups
- Local Chamber of Commerce

Importation of Solid Waste

A privately held solid waste disposal company wants to purchase a large tract of land to build a “megafill” for solid waste disposal. Waste will be imported by truck from other states. The company has promised the rural county free disposal of their waste and five percent of the tipping fee to be returned to the community specifically for education and schools. Does your community accept or decline this offer?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Parent Teacher Associations
- Trucking Association
- Environmental Groups
- Solid Waste Association of North America
- Homeowners Association

Central Piedmont Region

Application of Sludge as Compost on Farmland

Your county has a wastewater sludge problem. They have to get rid of it. They want to be able to dispose of it by spreading it as compost on nearby farms rather than paying large sums to dispose of it in a sanitary landfill. The farmer would not have to pay for fertilizer.

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Homeowners Associations
- Rural Water Association
- Environmental Organizations
- Water Environment Association
- Farm Bureau Association

Change in Fishing and Hunting Regulations on Public Lands

The state is proposing new regulations on fishing and hunting on public lands. Fees for licenses and fines would triple, the number of hunters and fishermen allowed on public land would be reduced. The funds raised by increasing fees and fines would go toward increasing the amount of land held in public trust. Do you agree with the proposal or disagree?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Isaak Walton League
- Nature Conservancy
- Hunters Organizations

Decisions on Use of Tobacco Fund

Funds have been set aside by the state from the Tobacco Fund. Your locality must decide how to spend the funds. Do you pay incentives for manufacturing and other economic development or do you provide incentives for farmers to switch to alternative crops?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Farm Bureau
- Chamber of Commerce
- Manufacturers Association
- Taxpayers Associations

Mountain Region

Poultry Processing Plant

The large company that owns several large poultry farms wants to build a processing plant. The plant would provide jobs in your locality that currently has record high unemployment. The wastewater from the plant would require expensive upgrades to the wastewater plant. Do you allow them to build?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Chamber of Commerce
- Poultry Producers Association
- Taxpayers Association
- Natural Resources Defense Council

Logging on Public Lands

The state Department of Forestry is conducting hearings on proposed changes in the regulations governing logging on public lands. Logging is a large industry in your community but has been struggling recently. The regulations will increase the amount of public land that can be logged, thereby increasing the jobs available in your community. Do you agree or disagree?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Sierra Club
- Lumber Association
- Chamber of Commerce

Development of a Wind Farm in Community

A privately held alternative energy company wants to build a wind farm in your community to generate electricity. They are promising that your electricity costs will go down but you have heard that wind farms are noisy and can damage migratory bird habitats. Do you want the wind farm?

Typical constituent groups could be:

- Audubon Society
- Wind Energy Association
- Natural Resources Defense Council