Public participation processes can be messy, unwieldy, unpredictable, and imperfect. A weathered practitioner will readily remark that there is no perfect secret recipe. “Designing Public Participation Processes” by John M. Bryson, Kathryn S. Quick, Carissa Schively Slotterback, and Barbara C. Crosby thoughtfully seeks to define the composition of successful public participation processes through
the use of 12 design guidelines. These guidelines are excellent; however, an important clue imbedded in the authors’ table 1 speaks to the complexity of the process and the proper mix of ingredients: “Note that these are interrelated, iterative tasks, not a step-by-step template.” Success, in part, is attributable to a wisely designed approach. The ability to effectively manage a mix of relationship building, public perception, trust, and empowerment makes up the remainder.

The authors’ design guidelines provide a very useful list from which to draw on to create an effective public participation process. The authors aptly note the nuances between the various purposes of public engagement, the responsibility to manage expectations, and the significance of a well-thought-out approach before commencing a public engagement effort. All too often, practitioners do not think deeply enough about context and purpose, resources and management, evaluation or design. Each one of these guidelines deserves careful examination and understanding, as they truly are the staples for a very good process.

These staples, however, do not fully reflect the complexity of the makings necessary to concoct a successful recipe—if one were to exist. Public participation is, first and foremost, about relationships. It is the way in which relationships work during such processes that often will determine success or failure. The note in table 1 about iterative tasks hints at the hard work ahead if a strong process is truly desired. Relationships are work; careful listening, demonstrated commitment, and follow-through are required. And, as in a personal relationship, one must understand that nothing stays on course exactly as planned—continual adjustments are required.

Practitioners must be true, trusted, respected, and committed to working in the best interests of all stakeholders in order to be effective. Some suggest, as mentioned in design guideline 12, that the “[c]areful articulation of mission, goals and objectives; roles and responsibilities; phases or steps” can lead to success. This approach, however, can fail if hearts are not engaged as well. Public perception of the motives behind the process, the person or people moving the process, and the resulting final recommendations can determine the final result regardless of process design.

A great deal of responsibility rests with the practitioner to ensure that the process builds trust. The Consensus Building Institute identifies the four cornerstones of trust as expertise (technically and interpersonally competent), reliability (keep commitments), goodwill (good intentions), and authenticity (being genuine). This combination of professional (expertise, reliability) and personal (goodwill, authenticity) characteristics are necessary qualities desired in the champions and facilitators who are charged with engaging the public.

Successful results originate from how well the participation process was first formulated. Use of the design science framework speaks to a user-based approach, very similar to human-centered design employed by well-heeled manufacturing firms such as Steelcase. The design process is about reimagining a product’s purpose from the user’s perspective. Public participation processes should not be created with the explicit intentions of serving a project or entity. Rather, processes should be designed to best service the needs of the public by providing opportunities for meaningful participation.

What is meaningful participation? As noted by the authors, assessing and properly fitting the design of the public participation process to the appropriate context ensures that the public’s time is not wasted with useless meetings and unachievable expectations. There is a certain art to creating the right process that invites the public to participate; practitioners to lend their professional expertise but, where appropriate, provide the opportunity for the public to choose priorities; an empowered public to discover actionable items that build ownership; and implied or explicit permission for the public to implement their desired goals with or without practitioner guidance.

The quest to find the best, most effective public participation process is, without question, necessary in today’s environment of constrained resources. Acknowledgment of production and participation costs resulting from a process is important; so, too, is the recognition that a meaningful public participation process can create new resources in a community. Green Grand Rapids, the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan’s latest master plan update and public engagement effort, is anticipated to result in new investments of more than $30 million for quality-of-life improvements, nearly all of which evolved out of a half-million-dollar planning process. Community empowerment has made the plan a living document.

The systematic approach of the authors’ design guidelines rightfully suggests that public participation is a process. It is a process of understanding a problem and then developing impactful solutions. Relationship building, public perception, trust, and empowerment are several ingredients that are the “low notes”—the deep lingering flavors in foods that form the base or the backdrop for other flavors—that assist in formulating success. The simple beauty of public participation is that it is never static because the intended users change depending on the problem. Therefore, no secret recipe exists; instead we have helpful guidelines to assist in the design of an effective process.