



COMMUNITY BUILDING ENGAGING CITIZENS IN THE COMMUNITY Best Practices

Strong communities recognize the need for, value of, and strength in a broad and inclusive engaged citizenry. There are major benefits of an involved citizenry in a community's decision making processes. Implementing a strategy to achieve this will take time and likely be challenged by individuals and organizations. The following are important points to consider:

- √ Actively involving citizens in a community must occur in all areas of governance for it to be effective.
- √ To reap the benefits of increased citizen participation in community decision making, the governance/decision making structure needs to adapt to the changes. Trying to integrate the new concepts of citizen involvement into existing structure will result in frustration and failure.
- √ Shared community decision making will require a change in the roles of elected, appointed, and salaried officials. Rather than the "command and control" model of decision making, officials need to build a supportive environment for active citizen participation, including an atmosphere of civility, respect, and trust. They need to share information, encourage diversity and develop and implement processes for connecting citizens to governance. In addition, they should reinforce their commitment, through communication and actions, to the new model of decision making.
- √ Encouraging citizens to become actively involved citizens in community governance requires elected, appointed, and salaried officials to develop a variety of interpersonal and process skills, including active listening, empathy, facilitation, empowering others, open communication, collaboration, cooperation, consensus building, and conflict resolution, to name a few.
- √ When community members are asked to participate, officials must value their participation. If encouraging citizen involvement is merely lip service to appease a group in town, the result will be more damaging than retaining the status quo of hierarchical decision making.

- √ A plan for increased citizen participation should develop with involvement from a wide array of citizens, groups, and organizations. If it's devised without this input, many will see it as "business as usual" and won't believe the change to shared decision making.
- √ Once a strategy is developed, share it with the entire community. Reflect the key concepts of encouraging citizen involvement in governance – constant open communication, multiple access points, and multiple delivery methods.
- √ Many community members need to be educated on the meaning of shared governance, how it affects them, and their responsibilities. This needs to be communicated constantly, as for many, this is a totally new concept.
- √ Citizens have a responsibility to keep themselves informed on the issues facing them in their community. To achieve this officials need to ensure widespread sharing of information.
- √ Don't overlook youth. Make participation meaningful for youth as well as for adults. Today's involved youth are the involved leaders and citizens of tomorrow.
- √ Opportunities need to be made available for community members to develop new skills such as active listening, to participate effectively in the new shared decision making environment.



COMMUNITY BUILDING

ENGAGING CITIZENS IN THE COMMUNITY

Community Building

In many communities across the country, the majority of citizens aren't engaged in the decision-making processes in their communities. Though aptly illustrated by the current historically low percentage of individuals voting in national, state, and local elections, the issue goes much deeper than voting.

Though they are often active volunteers in community organizations, many community members feel powerless when it comes to the decisions made that directly affect their lives. They want elected officials and administrators to listen to their concerns, share the power and responsibility of governance, and help develop a sense of belonging to the community.

On the other hand, many elected officials and government administrators see a need to increase citizen participation in decision-making processes and they view their citizenry as apathetic. Many times positions on board and committees lie vacant and regular citizen attendance at committee, board, and town meetings is virtually nonexistent. Many times people show up only when they have an issue or complaint.

Government officials rarely hear positive feedback on their performance. There is a fundamental disconnect in many communities between local government and the citizens. This comes at a time when federal and state governments are passing on more of the problem solving to the local level.

A key component of healthy communities is an engaged citizenry. This is when community members are actively engaged in defining issues, policy making, problem solving and decision making addressing community issues that affect their daily lives.

In this model of shared community decision making, citizens work along side elected, appointed, and salaried officials in governing the community. Officials' roles change from authoritarian decision maker to that of empowerer, mentor, supporter, collaborator, change agent, and facilitator.

For most communities, maximizing the involvement of its members in policy and decision making activities results in community ownership of decisions and the resultant changes. When community members have ownership of and a stake in decisions, they are more likely to participate in the follow through work. Public involvement produces public support for solutions to community problems.

There are major benefits of an involved citizenry in a community's decision making processes. Problem solving is enhanced when the diverse ideas, talents, skills, and knowledge of many people come together on an issue.

When citizens are involved, they become more knowledgeable of the complex issues facing local government. From this position, they can offer support, inform and encourage others to participate. Engaged citizens are much more likely to develop ownership of the issues, and their solutions, in the community, and work with public officials to resolve them.

A driving force behind many engaged community members is self interest. Community leaders must try to recognize common issues involved in the myriad of self interests and to empower individuals to work together for the collective good of the community.

Strong communities recognize the need for, value of, and strength in a broad and inclusive engage citizenry. Today, individuals find more and more obligations competing for their limited time, including employment, commuting, and families.

As community members are pulled in numerous directions, many want to participate in their community but just "don't have the time." They care about the community and want to work for community well-being, but need help to make it work for them. The community must actively invite members to participate and structure involvement to maximize citizen participation. Opportunities for citizen involvement must be attractive, flexible, short term, valued, and rewarding.

To prosper, the community must develop ways for its members to become engaged within the entire spectrum of community life. The community needs to prove to its citizens it's working to engage them through an extensive offering of flexible involvement choices. Members who are engaged, valued, respected, and recognized will become advocates for participation in community governance. They in turn will recruit others.

Effectively increasing citizen participation involves encouraging and valuing diversity. This not only includes race, but also diversity of culture, opinion, and ideas. Certain groups of individuals in communities are frequently marginalized from various aspects of the decision making process. They may include the disabled, minorities, unemployed, poor, parents, youth, elderly, businesses, civic organizations, commuters, seasonal residents, landowners, renters or farmers. For a number of reasons, there are barriers to active involvement. A strategy for effectively involving community members should address all the different groups in town, taking into consideration the unique circumstances for each group in how they access information and how they can participate.

Developing an engaged citizenry involves examining the ways citizens are connected to their government, creating new roles for citizens and elected, appointed, and salaried officials. Eventually, the cumulative effect will be a majority of community members actively involved in higher quality democratic decision making.

Resources:

Building Citizen Involvement: Strategies for Local Government. Mary L. Walsh. ICMA, Washington, DC, 1997.



COMMUNITY BUILDING

ENGAGING CITIZENS IN THE COMMUNITY

Ideas for Action

- ◆ **Incorporate a local civic curriculum**, grades K-12, into the public school system to encourage youth participation. Implement through community leaders and volunteers.
- ◆ **Hold a career day** for government and non-profit organizations so people can see what the jobs are like.
- ◆ **Create an opportunity (day) to listen to youth** and what they want to contribute, and then find ways to help them get involved.
- ◆ **Create a Community Participation Day**, combining recognition and information about participation.
- ◆ **Create a Government Awareness Week** to try to reach those people who don't usually participate. Meet the people on their turf. Make it diverse and inclusive by developing a coordinating committee of private, public and non-profit organization representatives.
- ◆ **Increase participation by seniors** by conducting an "Interest Level" survey for community participation. Work with SCORE, RSVP, and local senior groups to implement.
- ◆ **Hold regular brown bag lunches with government officials** where everyone can voice their opinions. These would allow elected officials to stay in touch with their constituents, and for the people to be heard.
- ◆ **Recognize elected officials** for their service through visible means. By showing them and the general public that their work is valued, it encourages more people to serve.
- ◆ **Create ad hoc committees** to include people who live outside an area but work in a community and have valuable input.
- ◆ **Create institutionalized internships** so they continue from year to year. For example, an internship always filled by a senior in the high school, with selection an honor.

- ◆ **Use special interest and talents in the community** in creating an advisors program to assist leadership in specific areas of concern.
- ◆ **Ask for help from the community.** Make the need for participation widely known. Publicize the need for volunteers through the public directory, a website, or through regular media want ads.
- ◆ **Provide student financial aid for public service.**
- ◆ **Use student government to access students.** Ask them for help and provide opportunities.
- ◆ **Use time limited, project or issue specific task forces in government.** Have members be cross disciplinary to advise standing boards.
- ◆ **Develop a town website or public directory** of who's who and what's what in all areas of the community. It could include a list of volunteer organizations and how town government works. Educate the public about the responsibility of volunteering and who needs volunteers. Put the directory on video and circulate to the community library and video stores.
- ◆ **Encourage student involvement** through activities like a student day in town government.
- ◆ **Involve students in the budget or decision-making processes** so they see how it works and feel like they have a vested interest in the process and outcomes.
- ◆ **Run student organization meetings like Town Meetings** so students have some experience in the process prior to actually attending a Town Meeting.
- ◆ **Conduct open non-agenda type meetings**, like a welcome or hospitality night, occurring two or three months prior to elections or between various organizations like Kiwanis and Rotary, so people who might be interested in running for office can learn about positions and the issues they would be required to address in public office.
- ◆ **Produce a newsletter of school, community and government activities** using student help. It could include information on how "things get done" and how to access the system.
- ◆ **Make all reports readable and in everyday English** so everyone can understand what has taken place at meetings.
- ◆ **Produce voter guides on how to run for public office.**
- ◆ **Conduct sessions where people who want to run for office** can learn how, and then once running, have forums where candidates can discuss their views with voters.

- ◆ **Post information about how government works around the community, in places people frequent. Disseminate decisions more widely and make them readable.** Have one central location where all information is posted.
- ◆ **Have government, non-profits and business conduct workshops in schools** on issues important to students so they can see how the process works.
- ◆ **Encourage local civic and service organizations to start youth groups** so young people can learn the process and the ethic of service early in their lives.
- ◆ **Have civic and service groups work together** to create a fund supporting civic education.
- ◆ **Encourage all organizations in the community** to use their existing forums and meetings for some civic education.
- ◆ **Encourage the media to respond to positive local government actions.** Local interest stories can help develop positive attitudes so people want to find out about what is happening and to participate.
- ◆ **Conduct education courses on how the system works and how to access it.**
- ◆ **Local Neighborhood Pride:** Create local pride and action. Don't depend on government to solve all the community's problems. It's also easier to accomplish on the local level and it can be a training ground for involvement.

Resources:

Granite State Civic Profile Book of Ideas. The Governor's Commission on New Hampshire in the 21st Century.