

COMMUNITY BUILDING

ENGAGING CITIZENS IN THE COMMUNITY

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 alongside 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.