

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.