

Community Building Through Increasing Citizen Participation

In many communities across the country, the majority of citizens are not 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, to share the power and responsibility of governance, and to help develop a sense of belonging to the community.

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 empoweror, mentor, supporter, collaborator, change agent, and facilitator.

For most communities, maximizing the involvement of their 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 therefore work with public officials to resolve them.

A driving force behind many engaged community members is self interest. Therefore community leaders must try to recognize the common issues involved in the myriad of self interests and 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 engaged 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. Therefore, the community must actively invite members to participate and structure that involvement to maximize citizen participation. Opportunities for citizen involvement must be attractive, flexible, short term, valued, and rewarding. In order to prosper, the community must develop ways for its members to become engaged within the entire spectrum of community life. Therefore, the community needs to prove to its citizens that it is working to engage them through an extensive offering of flexible involvement choices. Members who are engaged, valued, respected, and recognized will become advocates for the 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. Frequently in communities certain groups of individuals are 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, farmers, etc. For a myriad of reasons, there are barriers to active involvement. Therefore, 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 in which citizens are connected to their government and 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. If you are interested in UNH Cooperative Extension's programs to

help build strong democratic communities, contact Michele Gagne at 603-862-5046 or

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