

Community Outreach and Engagement

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Why reach out and engage your local community?

Healthy communities have an active and engaged citizenry. There are many ways to engage. Civic engagement is a broad term used for the many ways community members are involved in civic life, from volunteering on a town committee to coaching youth hockey, taking care of local trails, or joining the garden club. All of these activities add to the health of the community and create strong social connections or social capital. Public engagement is involvement in local decision-making – decisions that have an impact on the whole community.



Most people associate public engagement with local governance. New Hampshire has a strong tradition of local governance and citizen participation. Most towns generally operate with the town meeting form of government, where the registered voters in the town act as the town legislature, and a board of selectmen acts as the executive of the town. The community is invited to gather and decisions are made at the annual town meeting.

Communities also deliberate and make decisions about community issues such as planning for a new development project, school-related topics, and local budgets outside of the annual town meeting. Community members must have an opportunity to participate in the discussion and decision-making, and community leaders have a responsibility to reach out and engage their citizens. Residents often have personal knowledge or experience with a community issue; ideas, alternate plans, or solutions not previously considered; suggestions for resources; or offers to lend their skills to projects and tasks. Community interest, understanding, and support for an issue, project or program will increase with engagement of citizens.

What is outreach?

Outreach and engagement are two distinct ways to connect with your community. Outreach is one-way communication that tells community members about an issue, problem, opportunity, or decision. Outreach can be postcards sent to homeowners, fliers placed throughout a community, website postings, and meeting announcements, for example. Community leaders inform the public of an upcoming discussion and invite them in to comment or participate. Many communities require this important step in working closely with residents, and outreach can be essential when the public senses that the topic is not controversial or interesting and would likely not attend.

Benefits of Outreach and Engagement

- Increases public understanding and support for an issue
- Local decisions reflect the interests of the community
- Allows different perspectives to be represented
- Builds accountability and trust
- Identifies shared community concerns, interests, and goals
- Creates strong, healthy, vibrant places to live, work, learn, and plan
- Allows for creative problem-solving
- Increases social capital
- Develops new community leaders
- Helps in the discovery of community assets, skills, and resources



What is engagement?



Community leaders often look for ways to broaden public participation. Public engagement can lead to broader participation and wider community input in decision-making. Through deliberate, well planned public engagement, community members become informed about, participate in, and influence public decisions. Community members go beyond just knowing about a pending decision to participating in the decision-making process—they become a part of the community change. The engagement process includes listening, discussion, deliberation, and decision-making. Successful community engagement builds relationships in the community which, ultimately, strengthens the community's social fabric and develops new leaders.

Ways to engage

Engagement should be neutral – it is not advocacy work or advocating for a certain view. It opens up the discussion and encourages broad participation. Consider the format for engagement—the methods you choose should reflect your purposes and engagement goals. Do you want your community to dive deeply into a complex issue or just gauge their reaction to a pending change, issue, or idea? Do you seek a solution to a community problem or help in creating a vision for the next 20 years? Be sure to fit the process to your participants and your goal. Engagement processes abound: visioning session, forums, charettes, issues open houses, world cafés, web-based and online tools, and asset mapping, to name a few. All foster broad public participation but each has a unique format and purpose. All, however, require planning, knowledge of the format, and usually, a leader or facilitator.

All methods have value as long as they help you build relationships and allow the public to share their thoughts. In some cases you may use a number of engagement tools – like a facilitated vision session and social media to gather ideas for the future.

Identifying your public

Inviting the public to community discussion and decision-making can be challenging because, ideally, you should include everyone. So, where do you start to engage everyone in your community? Consider who may be affected by or interested in your issue. Think about all of the civic infrastructure that makes up your community such as schools, businesses, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, civic groups, service organizations, senior center, faith-based organizations, library, town boards, boy and girl scouts, 4-H, recreation organizations, and others. Invite a contact from each organization to the discussion. Also ask them to encourage their respective networks to participate. Your outreach and engagement effort should reach out to all of these groups but remember to reach out (send postcard, flier etc.) *and* engage (ask them directly) for the greatest success.

Tips for Success at Engagement Events

- Select the right location – it should be neutral and easy to access
- Chose a format to best suit your goals and participants interests—a forum, visioning, charettes, small group discussion, world café, asset mapping
- Use a trained facilitator to manage the event
- Share the agenda and be clear on what you want to accomplish
- Use data and reliable information to inform your participants
- Develop clear and concise questions using plain language – no jargon
- Have a snack and refreshments available
- Take time for introductions
- Thank participants, use what you have learned, share your report and keep engaging!
- Tell them how you will use what you have heard

How Can Underrepresented Populations be brought into Decision-Making?

Some community members may have never participated in community discussions before and may be underrepresented in decision-making. Underrepresented community members may include youth, seniors, minorities, veterans, limited income populations, and residents with disabilities. The list may be different in your community. Make a special effort to include all

community members. Often the location, time, language, format, or topic may be challenging for underrepresented groups. Make an effort to go to them to talk at a time and location convenient and comfortable for them. An organization or leader with experience connecting with the community may be your best first contact, as you may find a greater level of trust. Take the time and do the planning to build these important new relationships. Underrepresented populations have ideas, concerns, and insights of great value.

Equity and Engagement Checklist

- ✓ Strive for demographically representative engagement that reflects the community or region where planning is occurring. This may entail special efforts to reach out and engage groups that traditionally have not participated in such work, for reasons of place, economic status, age, education levels, mobility limitations or other disabilities, or cultural and ethnic differences.
- ✓ To the extent that is legally permissible, create opportunities for participatory decision making as the first principle in planning activities. Planners have special expertise and knowledge. That expertise and knowledge should be shared with community partners as much as possible, in order to increase informed participation, a shared sense of investment in decisions and implementation, and equitable relationships. The goal of mutual empowerment of planners and community members is crucial
- ✓ As planning goals are set and decisions are made, consider the impact of those decisions (before they are finalized) on all constituent groups and sectors in a community or region.
- ✓ In public conversations, media releases, and reports published for public consumption, use plain, everyday language accessible to anyone (including considerations of reading level and translation from English to other languages as appropriate).
- ✓ As plans and goals are developed, take into account their impact on diverse groups, including best judgments about what groups could be advantaged and what groups could be disadvantaged by those decisions, and taking steps to mitigate any anticipated losses of resources, status, or power by those who might be disadvantaged.
- ✓ Design effective feedback loops to inform participants about the ways their input was considered and acted upon.
- ✓ Respect the core value of local control that characterizes New Hampshire's political and community culture. Plans and goals that require regional collaboration (for example in areas such as transportation, natural resource management, public school governance, and economic development) should strive to maintain community identity and integrity as much as possible.
- ✓ Planning processes must attend to the "soft infrastructure" of communities—the people who live, work, and interact with each other, not just the built environment that serves those people.
- ✓ Specific planning decisions concerned with principles of equity will take into account such matters as where stores and businesses are located with respect to walking and transportation routes used by less affluent or minority populations or those with special mobility needs; access to fresh, affordable foods; personal safety; and other criteria that reflect the goal of maximum access and participation in community life.
- ✓ Practices of equitable engagement in local and regional planning efforts should be sufficiently consistent across sites so that residents moving from one community to another will have similar access to and be able to understand planning and decision-making processes.

Source: Granite State Future Equity and Engagement Committee 2013 <http://www.granitestatefuture.org/>

How to handle disagreements or conflict in community engagement

Your engagement process should encourage a range of views, plan for disagreement, and prepare to manage it. Some level of conflict or disagreement is acceptable and constructive—allow thoughts and ideas to flow and manage the tension. Above all, respect every participant no matter their view. A strong engagement process will incorporate time and space for everyone to participate while limiting unproductive conflict and pre-empting individuals from taking over the discussion. A good facilitator will allow disagreements to be shared and recorded but will help keep the discussion on track. Set ground rules at the beginning of an engagement session. These may include taking turns talking, acting respectful, not making personal statements, and staying on topic. The participants should review and approve the ground rules and can even suggest new ones. This will encourage the whole group to follow the rules and provides support to the facilitator. Make your process open and work for everyone.

Next steps after you have engaged your community

After your engagement session, continue to engage with your participants and the wider community. First, be committed to using the insights, ideas, and input from the session in your planning and decision-making. Thank participants and ask them to stay involved by joining an action group or following up on their recommendations. Those who participated will want to know how things will change or what the result of their participation is. Share your report, publicize your decision, and demonstrate how you used what you learned – show participants the impact they have had.

Resources to learn more about engaging your community:

American Planning Association, Community Engagement: How Arts and Cultural Strategies Enhance Community Engagement and Participation.

<https://www.planning.org/research/arts/briefingpapers/engagement.htm>

Institute for Local Government: What is Engagement and How to Do It

<http://www.ca-ilg.org/WhatIsPublicEngagement>

Institute for Local Government Public Engagement <http://www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement>

National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation Resource Guide on Public Engagement 2010: <http://ncdd.org/rc/pe-resource-guide>

Policy Link: The Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities <http://www.policylink.org/find-resources/library/community-engagement-guide-for-sustainable-communities>

Community Engagement Guide: A Tool to Advance Equity & Social Justice in King County May 2011

[file:///C:/Users/mem257/Downloads/CommunityEngagementGuideContinuum2011%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/mem257/Downloads/CommunityEngagementGuideContinuum2011%20(1).pdf)

Orton Family Foundation Blog, Top Ten Tips for Inclusive Engagement. Published by Betsy Rosenbluth on January 24, 2014

<http://www.orton.org/blog/17>

Orton Family Foundation Blog, Seven Ways to Increase Community Power in Local Decision-Making Published by Caitlyn Horose on March 25, 2013 http://www.orton.org/blog/seven_ways_to_increase_power_in_decision-making

The Facilitation Laboratory: Learning to Engage in Difficult Dialogue through Interactive Theater <http://youtu.be/llxigpOwHv8>

Tips for Engaging *after* your Public Session

- Keep working to build these community relationships.
- Ask participants to sign up for email updates or to follow you on social media.
- Ask participants to share their experience with others.
- Ask participants to engage again – even on different topic.
- Suggest participants take on a new role in the community such as leading a group or joining a board.
- Set up action committees immediately so participants have a role.

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