ICMA Program Excellence Awards – Community Sustainability

Polk County, Florida

Polk Growth Matters narrative

Polk Growth Matters is a community forum hosted by the Polk County Growth Management Department. Its purpose is to provide an opportunity for citizen education and constructive discussion on growth management issues. It is intended to further a general and common understanding of current issues in Polk County. Consistent with its focus on community education and dialogue, the forum is not used to advocate a position on issues.

For the 2009 Polk Growth Matters Speaker Series, Polk County began offering these forums as webinars to enable participants who may not otherwise be able to participate, to be included. For residents who may have child care or transportation challenges, for instance, this allows them to engage the same as if they were in attendance in person. Webinar participants can see and hear the speakers, their presentations, and the audience’s questions and answers, as well as submitting questions of their own to be answered. This format started on January 29, 2009 and continues today.

Polk Government Television, or PGTV, films the webinars to stream to the internet. The webinars have been hosted by local news media websites. In 2009, the Lakeland Ledger, Polk County’s largest local newspaper of general circulation, was the host. In 2010, additional media outlets have also signed on to carry the webinars, including: Fox 13 television, the News Chief newspaper, Hall Communications Big 4 commercial radio stations – WPCV, WLKF, MAX 98.3 – and WUSF, which is the local NPR station. Additionally, PGTV re-airs the recorded presentations periodically during open programming time and it is available on Polk County’s website on-demand <http://www.polk-county.net/pgtv.aspx>

Topics have included: Transit Oriented Design, Brownfields Redevelopment, Sustainability, Water Resource Sustainability, and The Future of Transit. Online participation has typically ranged from 10-20 persons, with typically half submitting comments or questions. Additionally, online participation sometimes outnumbers attendees who are physically at the presentation. In person attendees for these presentations typically ranged from 20-40 people. Feedback on surveys has generally been positive toward the Speaker Series as a whole, as well as feedback on the internet as to liking the webinar format.

The Polk Growth Matters webinars were so successful that the webinars were expanded to other types of meetings as well. This is a good indication that this program could be expanded and duplicated easily.

The value of the forums are to help educate the public, staff members, and decision makers about growth management issues that may come up in other settings as they relate to particular projects, comprehensive plan policies, local codes, and more. This information will hopefully help people to make informed decisions about related issues. By taking a proactive educational approach, this may help to avoid potentially contentious issues because someone may not understand the issue at hand.

Additionally, continuing education credits have been obtained for most of the forums, which help professionals stay current in the growth management field to better serve the public. The presenters have been nationally recognized experts, who often present for a fee or at conferences. In this case, many participate as a service to the profession and to help education the public. By offering presentations locally, Polk County benefits from a broad perspective without having to travel or spend a lot of money.



