

■ GETTING INVOLVED WITH YOUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Thoughtful and effective presentations by citizens to elected or appointed officials can make a big impact on officials' decisions. Upon this premise, Clearwater, Florida, has built a visionary new program that smoothes the way for citizens to inform government officials about their concerns.

The city has introduced its resident engagement program, an opportunity for residents to express their opinions, views, and concerns to city government decision makers on issues that affect their quality of life. Developed by Clearwater's neighborhood services division in partnership with the University of South Florida Jim Walter Partnership Center, the Clearwater chamber of commerce, and the Neighborhood Coalition, this program invites residents to work with their local government leaders, and it teaches them the skills necessary to participate in the regulatory process. The program comprises a 30-minute video and a corresponding workbook.

THE IDEA

In April 2005, as the city embarked on new initiatives and faced growing challenges throughout the community,

Clearwater's mayor, city council, and city manager were looking for a way to encourage greater citizen participation. Their direction resulted in the formation of a team of citizens, city staff, government officials, and community partners to work together to develop a program that would encourage and enhance citizen involvement. The team conducted a nationwide search for similar programs but found no communities with a model that would fulfill Clearwater's vision. So it created its own program.

To get started, the engagement team conducted 26 citizen and stakeholder interviews to obtain their valuable insight and perspectives. The team discovered that presenting issues before the council was difficult for many citizens, especially when they were speaking against a proposal.

Citizens were also confused by the procedures, codes, laws, and terminology used at council meetings. All these factors contributed to poor presentations and frustrated citizens who thought their government was unresponsive to their needs. With this information in hand, the engagement team was ready to move forward.

THE PROGRAM

The idea was simple: informed citizens could better communicate their ideas, be understood by councilmembers, have their concerns addressed, and be more willing to get involved in the future if they were offered guidance on

how to navigate the system. The challenge was how to reach them.

The team decided that an educational workshop, including an interactive video and a workbook, would be the best approach. Clearwater's public communications department began working with neighborhood services and the engagement team to develop a 30-minute educational DVD/video.

The video begins with brief engaging messages from Clearwater's mayor and each councilmember. Viewers are then introduced to the 4 Ps: prepare, partner, practice, and present. The video teaches a variety of processes, gives citizens a tour of the council chambers, explains where councilmembers and city staff are seated, and indicates where citizens can make presentations.

Three entertaining and educational scenarios are then presented; each addresses typical concerns of residents: speeding cars in one neighborhood, code violations in another, and a proposed condo development near single-family housing in another area. Each scenario features the wrong way and the better way to present a concern to the council. After each scenario, the narrator offers tips and presentation dos and don'ts to the audience.

"We took volunteer citizens from our community to act out each scenario," says Jeff Kronschnabl, Clearwater's development and neighborhood services director, "and that made the program even stronger and more exciting."

FYI

While the engagement video was being produced, other team members began working on the corresponding workbook and workshop curriculum. The workbook and video go hand in hand. The workbook provides additional activities, information, and helpful resources for citizens to use during and after the workshop. With a completed video, workbook, and workshop curriculum, the engagement team unveiled the program to citizens on February 25, 2006.

Citizens have been receptive to the program. Calls have come in from individuals and neighborhood associations throughout Clearwater. It's no longer about fighting city hall; now it's all about a communication effort that seeks to make sure citizens are heard and fully understood.

For more information or for a copy of the video and workbook, contact Becky Melendez, neighborhood services manager, at 727/562-4585 or by e-mail at Rebecca.Melendez@myclearwater.com.

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