

Citizen Engagement – Is Your Current Process Broken?

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As I considered what to write about for this month's citizen engagement article, I tried to reflect on what "citizen engagement" really means to me. For me, it's a complex web that ultimately requires us as individuals to be accountable for how we as local government leaders interact with our own communities. As a professional planner, I relish the opportunity to engage with citizens, learn about their desires for their community, and work diligently to bring their visions to fruition. At the end of the day, it seems that true 'engagement' is measured by how well a jurisdiction listens to its constituents *and* how well it reacts to the feedback that it receives. I would like to challenge each of you to reflect on your engagement processes and consider how they might be improved.

In many jurisdictions it appears that the process for engaging our citizens is either completely broken or in serious need of a complete overhaul. Think about the last time you attended a public meeting. Do you recall if the board permitted comments from the public? If so, I am willing to bet that public comments were limited to a specific time, perhaps three minutes or less. Were people able to present thoughtful ideas in that amount of time? Did citizens seem frustrated? Did the board look engaged?

Most local government public meetings are conducted using an antiquated formula: staff members present items, citizens are given three-minute increments to make comments or ask questions which often go unanswered, and officials deliberate and vote. Often there is little true *interaction* between the board and the public. Public turnout at meetings is often dismal at best, where earnest attendance will earn you a label as one of the "usual suspects". Dare to speak often and you may earn the label of "local curmudgeon". True public participation is often non-existent. When agendas contain routine items, this formula may seemingly work fairly smoothly. However, throw in a controversial topic and the problems with this approach become all too painfully clear. Public trust in government is at all-time lows and levels of polarization are extremely high.

Recognizing that the current format of public engagement is broken, we seek to find alternatives which may be helpful in correcting public perception and foster effective civic discourse. While these efforts often require a great deal of creativity, energy and commitment to succeed, the payoffs are often worth it. Research has shown that effective citizen engagement builds trust, creates a greater sense of community, enhances problem solving and may even increase the likelihood that citizens will financially support future projects.

In order to be more productive, I would propose the following three steps to consider when implementing a citizen engagement program:

1. Determine **why** you want to engage citizens in the first place.

Is it because you feel that it is the "right" thing to do for democracy to flourish? Or, do you wish to glean information about a specific initiative or project? Perhaps it's because you hold to the ideal that effective government calls for engagement with the public. Each reason calls for a different approach and success will be measured by different metrics.

2. Determine what citizen engagement *looks* like and *who* is responsible for implementing the process.

Engagement can take on many forms. It may be one-way communication where the government issues notices to the public. Or, it may involve dialogue shared among participants in a group setting. With advancements in technology, engagement can take place almost anywhere at any time. I would suggest that successful citizen engagement will involve elected officials, staff members, community groups and organizations, and citizens themselves. The successful implementation of citizen engagement processes requires well-designed approaches which are supported by both residents and officials alike. It stands to reason that people are more likely to uphold their responsibility to act when their participation was welcomed and when their contributions are used.

3. Determine *who* you are trying to engage.

What is meant by the term “citizen”? It is easy to define a citizen as one who has the legal status of “taxpayer” or “resident”. However, most local governments are also responsible for servicing those who live outside of their jurisdictions but are a part of the greater *community* which surrounds them. Therefore, I would argue that it is important to be engaged with citizens who do not meet the traditional legal definitions as well. The more inclusive we are in citizen engagement efforts, the better. This is why many citizen engagement programs have focused on the end-user as a “customer”, which better defines the roles and expectations of both the local government as well as the user.

Once a local government knows *why* it wants to engage citizens, what that approach *looks* like, *who* is responsible, and *who* you are trying to engage, then it is ready to begin implementing an engagement process. There are various methodologies to implementing citizen engagement strategies. Many of those approaches are highly effective. And, many of those same approaches are highly ineffective. The difference in success appears to lie in *how the government responds* when the public voices its opinions. Success hinges on whether or not the government listened to what was said by the public, what action is taken based on what was said, and whether or not it was worth the time and effort to participate.