

Civic Engagement ~ Stephanie Jones, Senior Program Manager/Compliance Officer, Virginia Resources Authority

Regarding civic engagement, I have been hearing of various localities taking a “go where the people are” approach. This is a great approach to engaging more citizens in governance. Generally, a citizen will only show up for a Council meeting if they have a very strong reaction to an agenda item – well after this has gone through the development process in the local government. To me, engagement is about involving citizens in the planning and visioning process.

So what is a go-where-the-people-are approach? It could mean attending festivals and events in your community and renting exhibit space to invite residents and businesses to provide thoughts about potential projects. It could mean attending meetings of community organizations, including charities and churches, and listening to what members of these organizations would suggest. It could even mean partnering with local craft breweries and hosting roundtable events. The sky is the limit – the more innovative, the better.

Here are two specific examples of this approach:

- York County is taking its comprehensive plan update to the people by engaging them in a comprehensive plan game where the players build their own community as they play the part of a citizen and a board member to learn about the diversity of opinions and provide practical feedback on the comprehensive plan process. The process will be kicked off with a Youth Commission meeting where youth will be asked, “What will it take in our community design for you to graduate, go away to college and then attract you back to our community?” This process will be followed up with homeowners’ association meetings, board committee meetings, employee meetings, and concluded with the annual Board of Supervisors retreat.
- Chesterfield County created an initiative called Blueprint Chesterfield to engage its community in the planning process. The initiative has its own website where citizens can review budget documents, easily see the big picture of what tax dollars are funding, and see engagement events. At the start of the initiative, staff attended 17 planned community events (various business, civic and social events), held three community workshops where 200+ people attended, and heard from 6,200 people through an online survey – all in a period of 39 days!

To engage all members of your community, especially working adults, local governments are going to need to re-invent the wheel on community engagement. Government transparency and civic engagement are two different things. Transparency in government is achieved by open-to-the-public meetings, live video streams of Council sessions, and minutes recording the action of the governing bodies. These are all good things, but these things alone do not lead to the citizenry being actively involved in the decision-making process. Democracy and self-determination work best when all members of the public let their voices be heard. It is up to local government leaders to share the microphone and go where the people are.