

A Different Thought on Citizen Engagement Taking Planning to the People

The City of Lynchburg is revising its Downtown Master Plan to build upon past successes and establish a new 20 year vision for the “heart” of the Lynchburg region. The new plan Downtown 2040 is being prepared in partnership with the Downtown Lynchburg Association, Hill Studio, Arnett Muldrow & Associates, Alta Planning and Hurt & Proffitt, Inc.

The city has always prided itself on having excellent civic engagement, yet the city wanted this process to go beyond the usual planning meetings, this process needed to be “epic”. The planning process involved: a kick-off meeting with quest speaker, Melody Warnick, author of “This is Where You Belong, The Art & Science of Loving the Place You Live”, multiple listening sessions geared toward specific topics, and a three day on-site design forum. While these sessions were all well attended and resulted in useful information, announced sessions typically result in attendance by those who have a special interest in the area.

A vibrant downtown is an indicator of a healthy city, and a successful downtown is frequented and available to all city residents as an employment, arts and cultural center of the region. In an effort to receive input from those who would not typically attend planning sessions, an on-line survey was established that garnered over nine hundred responses and the city wanted more. In an effort to make sure that input was received from a wider geographic area the project team conducted nine “pop-up” events during August 2017. These events were held at a variety of retail centers, the library, the community market and the city’s five higher education institutions and designed to engage citizens outside of the central business district for the planning of the downtown.

As the name implies, a pop-up event implies the project team sets up unannounced and engages citizens on a planning topic and in a few hours pop-down. This type of event is unique in that it allows the planning team to receive input from a wider variety of people that would not normally fill out on-line surveys, come to scheduled planning sessions or have mobility issues. As a result this allows the project team to gain a broader perspective on planning issues.

The pop-up event will differently be part of future planning initiatives in the city and we encourage you to try them in your locality. Here is a list of helpful tips for your pop-up sessions:

- Think about the logistics: You will need tables, chairs, ez-ups, easels, and other supplies that are easily transportable and transferred from team to team. Allow enough time for setting up, taking down and moving to a different location.
- Create a brand for your planning process: Design meeting materials, web sites and handouts that identify your process. Consider investing in flags or banners that will make the pop-up event easily recognizable.
- Choose your locations: Choose locations that will give you a diverse representation of your population. Contact retail centers and institutions early to get permission and agree upon an acceptable time.
- Choose your questions: Think about what information you are trying to obtain and design your pop-up questions accordingly. Some citizens may be willing to stay and talk, others will only be willing to provide input if it can be done quickly.
- Remember: An engaged and informed citizenry leads to good government.

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