

## A Guide To Effective, Meaningful Engagement

Most agree that civic engagement is an integral part of good governance. The ideas and knowledge gained by engaging with the public we serve drive improvements and ensure that decision makers, including elected leaders, are well informed throughout the decision-making process. But with so many engagement options to consider, engaging with the public in an effective and meaningful way is often a daunting task. Our fast-paced world, replete with so much information at our fingertips, and even on our wrists, means we're busier than ever before. And it's no different for the people we serve. The days of scheduling a public meeting — the standard-bearer for engagement as we used to know it — are all but over. But that doesn't mean that some of the tried-and-true methods of gaining the public's input are dead. Often, it's just the opposite. It's all a matter of how we apply a host of engagement tools, some old and some very new. The key is no different than it's ever been: identifying your audience and selecting the right tool for the job.

To provide departments with an edge when it comes to planning an engagement strategy, Chesterfield County enlisted a team of individuals from departments that regularly engage with the public. An idea hatched from their discussions: Let's build a guide that helps departments build engagement strategies. Today, Chesterfield County departments with a need for the public's vast knowledge use a playbook, the "Seven-Step Guide to Community Engagement." The guide helps departments and teams:

- Drill down topics and identify resources
- Define target audiences and determine desired levels of engagement
- Identify engagement tools and facilitation techniques
- Develop a communication outline or plan
- Make the most of an engaged audience
- Maintain open communications with the audience(s)
- Develop short- and long-term criteria to measure results

To build the guide, the team boiled down engagement from a seemingly endless array of possibilities to just seven easily digested steps. They recognized that a lengthy document, though well intentioned, probably wouldn't get much attention in the reality of the modern workday. Best of all, the guide, which is delivered to employees via the county's intranet site, is designed to be fluid. The beauty of the guide, we believe, is that the information and techniques it includes can be applied no matter how robust the engagement needed. Use one step, three steps, all seven steps. It's up to those applying it to take from the guide what they need, use it, and then assess how well it worked. All the while, members of the county's Communications and Media Department, which led the guide's development, are available to consult departments and teams on their engagement efforts. The guide has helped departments recognize that social media isn't the only way to engage in 2017. Like other things, it's a tool that has its place and time. Most successful engagement efforts incorporate multiple tools, because in local government, there's often a need to engage with multiple audiences, the needs of one audience sometimes being vastly different from another.

Arguably there's no department with as great a need to engage regularly with the public as our Planning Department. Members of the department were heavily involved in developing our Seven-Step Guide to Community Engagement, and they've also applied much of the guide to their daily efforts to engage on many projects, including several special area plans designed to be part of the county's comprehensive plan. A great example of Planning Department staff changing how to engage was their efforts to take their message to their audience, rather than expecting their audience to come to them. For instance, they cooperated with our public library to have staff attend children's story times at the library. While the kids were listening to the stories, planning staff engaged with moms and dads about a special area plan focused on their community. Planning also worked with schools to engage similarly at PTA meetings and back-to-school nights. They even attended pizza night. Another effort saw planning staff visiting a popular restaurant in a community — a great way to strike up conversations and gain meaningful input from citizens living in the area. For another project focused on bikeways and trails in the county, planning took its engagement efforts to area YMCAs. They recognized that YMCA's mission for healthy communities melded with planning's efforts to incorporate more opportunities for active living in the community through bikeways and trails.

Just when we thought government meetings were passé, we realized they were still needed among our engagement efforts. But rather than the typical speaker-Q&A format, we adopted open-house style workshops. Citizens come when it's convenient to them over the course of three or four hours. There, they find opportunities to talk one on one with county staff. County leaders, including elected supervisors, often attend these workshops, too. Citizens who shy away from approaching a mic and addressing a panel of government officials in a regular meeting format often find their voice with the individualized attention available at these workshops. And it's not just planning staff who have realized the benefit of holding such workshops. When our Budget and Management Department realized a need to engage citizens to define county priorities, they used similar workshops held at libraries and other easily accessible facilities. Complementing such efforts all the while was information being distributed via social media, email and the county's website, making the most of engaging with audiences in various ways.

Through our efforts to redefine how we engage with the public, we've learned that what's even more valuable than the information gained is the lasting relationships successful engagement helps to build with the community we serve. Like so many things, effective engagement is a moving target. Those relationships help to ensure we stay aimed in the right direction.