

## Civic Engagement During COVID-19

By Michael Stallings, Town Manager, Town of Smithfield

If nothing else, COVID-19 has forced us to rethink everything we do as local governments. We have been forced to revamp how we deliver services in an environment that does not allow us to have physical interactions with our citizens. How do we continue to respond to the needs of our citizens when our facilities are closed? How do we continue to provide services and at the same time protect our staff? How do we migrate to virtual meetings and still provide access to the public and provide for public input? These, and many more, questions have been front and center for all of us as Managers.

In these unique times, we must think outside of the box. We must reach into our bag of tricks and find something creative that will allow us to serve our citizens where they are. For most of us, this has meant coming to rely more on our websites and social media outlets. Maybe it meant trying a new platform or app that your municipality had never used, or even thought of before.

During this pandemic was the first time I had ever considered a virtual Town Council meeting. Once the bugs were worked out and we had the first one under our belt, it was not that bad. We were even able to allow the public to view the meeting and participate virtually. Could this be a new tool in our civic engagement toolbox that stays with us well beyond the pandemic? This may be a way to hold information sessions with the public that otherwise would not be able to attend in person.

We should all take notes of the unusual, and sometimes creative, methods we have undertaken as adapted to the unique circumstances that were presented to us by the pandemic. Some of these out of the box ideas may serve us well beyond the pandemic and will help us keep our citizens better engaged in their government. These tools and new approaches to civic engagement may help us reach out to those that have historically not been well represented with our normal civic engagement practices.

Let us continue to explore new and creative ways to ensure that all our public has a voice at the table. Even if it means that we must take the table to them.