

## Civic Engagement: Unexpected Opportunities

When most of us hear the term “civic engagement” we probably have flashbacks to a public hearing gone wrong, or the last time that the “Public Comments” portion of our Council or Board agenda turned into a Manager-bashing session. While these are definitely labeled as moments of “civic engagement”, I would argue that they are not meaningful when it comes to actual engagement. We are all keenly aware that the majority of our citizens do not participate in the traditional forms of civic engagement.

Most of us have taken the leap into the realm of social media as a main player in our civic engagement tool bag. Social media reaches more people in my locality than any other method we have used in the past. In my small town of 2,626 people, we have 1,200 people that like our Facebook page. That is significantly more than the number of people that pick up the Town’s weekly newspaper. It is also a different demographic than those that are reading the newspaper.

I am willing to bet that most of us are actively involved in multiple forms of civic engagement—some we may not even think about. Most of us have multiple programs and events that we don’t even think of as opportunities for civic engagement. I will give you one example from my experience, and encourage you all to reflect on your experiences to identify what unexpected opportunities have presented themselves to you.

In Windsor we do a summer concert series, as do many other localities. These concerts have provided an opportunity for us to interact with our community in a non-traditional manner. It also provides a pool of people from which we have conducted surveys using an online survey or comment table at the events. Events like these bring people into Town from surrounding areas. It can be valuable to hear what they think about your community, as well as receive input from the residents. Arguably, just as valuable, it provides an opportunity for the community to interact with itself. Citizens are provided with an opportunity to interact with each other at these events. These interactions makes the community stronger. This concert series was started as a way to give back to the community and to get the community out and together. It has blossomed into an unexpected opportunity for so much more.

I encourage all of you to examine your current programs and events for opportunities to engage citizens. As our way of life changes, so must our methods of civic engagement. We must meet the people where they are if we want to receive input from them. Without active civic engagement, are we truly being responsive to our citizens?