CENTRALINA
REGIONAL COUNCIL

SMALL TOWNS THRIVE

Community Engagement Guidance Document

The Small Towns Thrive initiative helps communities build local capacity, create connections and address needs that are unique to smaller towns. The program has three areas of focus: education, peer learning and technical services, all aimed at empowering community staff and fostering efficient, effective and resilient governance.

Small Towns Thrive Guidance Document: Community Engagement

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Introduction

Community Engagement is a core function of local government. Regular, inclusive engagement that is part of an engagement strategy can help communities better inform and mold their plans to meet the needs of their constituents, reduce decision making risks, create needed support for projects and save time and resources by bringing parties to the table to help with implementing a plan.

Practically speaking community engagement:
- Gathers public input to help inform decision-making – e.g., set the town's vision, strategic goals, and budget priorities.
- Creates an opportunity for diverse perspectives to be heard.
- Promotes community collaboration (across agencies, sectors, neighborhoods) and/or cross-community collaboration.
- Increases the public's understanding of local government.
- Builds trust between the town and the public.
- Manages time by helping communities tackle the "right" issues at the "right" time.

The International City County Management Association (ICMA) partnered in a recent national survey to better understand how residents want to engage to shape community decisions. Key findings include:

1. There is a perception that government is not listening.
2. The most common engagement approaches do not match resident preferences.
3. Residents have high expectations for accessible engagement.
4. Residents do not have enough information to meaningfully participate.
5. Residents expect to be informed of how their input was used.

What does this mean for small communities?
Engagement can be challenging for any community, but with smaller towns, there are additional barriers that may include smaller budgets, limited staff and limited capacity to plan, develop and implement. However, there are also key advantages, including tight networks, smaller geographies and knowledge of how, when and where information is best received. Whether it is embracing new technologies or meeting people where they are, the goal is to develop a strategy that meets the expressed needs of the people most impacted by decisions.

Key Principles of Engagement

Step 1: The Basics

Know your objectives. The best way to start with community engagement is to ask, "What are we trying to achieve?". Have you developed a new program that would benefit your town residents but are seeing that there its being underutilized? If so, then you might want to focus on informing residents about it as your main objective. Do you have funds to help renovate an existing park but aren't sure what residents want? Then your goal would be to find a community consensus on the future park improvements.

Define and know your audience and clarify their role. "The Public" looks different for every community, but every project or plan addresses several types of community members – if you are looking at getting feedback for a renovation to a senior community center, your definition of the public will be dramatically different compared to someone wanting to reach out about installing a splash pad at an old park. Say something about role.

Examine the past. Has your municipality done a project like this before? If so, how did it go? Taking the time to examine how previous efforts have played out can be beneficial for all parties and can have many lessons ready for you to implement for future projects.

Be sincere. It can be easy for staff members to try and be cold and professional when having these engagement sessions. Remember that you are talking to people, not Excel sheets, and be comfortable having the conversation with your residents on a human level.

Step 2: Address Residents' Engagement Needs

Show that you are listening by providing a regular, consistent means of engaging.

- **Allow time for a robust engagement process.** If you are engaging on a particular topic, project or program, start early to allow time for engagement throughout the full process.
- **Keep the communication line open.** For more general pulse checks with the community, have at least one way for residents to always provide input.

Support resident expectations for transparency and inclusion.

- **Recognize your community's existing social networks.** Whether it is a local bowling league, the congregation of a small church, or an online forum, every community has ties that you should reach out to and use for distribution and outreach.
- **Identify primary community hubs.** For every town, this looks different – some communities, this looks like a gas station parking lot, and for others, it is the park or a nearby general store.

Reduce barriers to engagement.

- **Time and place matter.** If you are not getting attendance at meetings, consult residents about the best meeting times to meet, consider virtual options and/or consider where they will be and go to them.
- **Incentives may be needed.** Offer food and refreshments, provide activities for children or childcare or consider stipends or gift cards for attendance.

Ensure participants have the information needed to provide input.

- **Educate the public during the process.** Whenever reaching out to the community for engagement, oftentimes the public is operating without all the information that would be needed to make an informed decision. Actively educate the community while engaging them, considering different learning styles in the process.
- **Establish a relationship with local media.** The media has a platform and while it can be challenging talking to the press, a positive relationship allows you to tap into their systems and establish a narrative that works for your purpose. Set them up for success by providing fact sheets, process maps, names for follow-up interviews, and inviting them to community events.

Close the loop on the engagement process.

- **Build two-way communication.** When you ask for the gift of input, the community is required to give their collective time, knowledge and opinion. In return, community members deserve the courtesy of knowing how their input will be used.

Engaging Your Community: When and How

When to engage your community?

Deciding when to engage the community is a very local, but very important decision. Some of the more common situations where communities look for feedback are listed below.

- In anticipation of new or improved community facilities, such as the renovation of a community meeting space, siting a new senior or a road widening.
- During the annual budgeting process as expenditures are prioritized.
- When developing any type of plan for the community, including a comprehensive land use plan, small area plan, downtown plan or other vision for growth.
- To support an upcoming bond referendum or community vote.

- Any time the community is approaching a topic that is expensive or potentially controversial.

Tools for engagement.

- **Surveys** are an extremely flexible way to engage your community, ranging in number of questions, geographic target area, topic area and instrument format (digital or paper).
- **Open house or drop-in meetings** provide flexibility for the participant, can increase one-on-one time and allow for individual concerns to be addressed. This format also helps manage conflict that can occur with presentation only formats.
- **Focus groups** provide opportunities for small group conversation, can be easier to schedule and offer a great option for engaging underserved populations, such as youth and seniors.
- **In-tact group meetings** meet people where they are, using previously established gatherings to gain inputs on topics of public interest.
- A **meeting in a box** technique can be used when you need to reach a broad set of stakeholders and have willing, trusted partners that can implement a distributed outreach model.
- Some **social media** platforms have interactive methods for engagement or can be used to advertise other engagement opportunities.
- Multiple **digital platforms** and applications are available for engagement with a range of costs and capabilities. Popular options include Mural, MetroQuest, Mentimeter or using the White Board option on Teams.
- **On-going, open engagement** and feedback can be established through open links that support community inputs. Links are often established on email signatures, social media and websites.

How Centralina Can Help!

Need guidance or a helping hand? Centralina's engagement experience can help you understand and address public concerns, develop strong, supportable solutions and address the right issues.

If you are just getting started, Centralina can help you think through an engagement strategy to address your needs, whether that is a general pulse check on community interests, engaging on a particular issue or as part of a community planning process, or engaging your staff. Once your strategy is set, we can assist you in choosing engagement tools, developing unbiased questions, analyzing and summarizing inputs and reporting findings.

This document was created as part of Centralina Regional Council's Small Towns Thrive initiative.

See www.centralina.org for additional resources to support our communities.

For additional information, please reach out to Kelly Weston,
Government Affairs and Member Engagement Administrator at kweston@centralina.org.

Additional Resources

- Biggs, D., Stansbery, S., & Nance, M. (2018). 100 great community engagement ideas: Tips, tricks, and best practices to help guide planners to better results! MetroQuest, Kimley Horn, & Centralina Regional Council.
- Thomas, T. (2022). Overseeing effective community engagement. ICMA. Link.