



How to Plan a Community Forum

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Why reach out and engage your local community?

Healthy communities have an active and engaged citizenry. There are many ways to engage. Civic engagement is a broad term used for the many ways community members are involved in civic life, from volunteering on a town committee to coaching youth hockey, taking care of local trails, or joining the garden club. All of these activities add to the health of the community and create strong social connections or social capital. Public engagement is involvement in local decision-making — decisions that have an impact on the whole community.

Most people associate public engagement with local governance. New Hampshire has a strong tradition of local governance and citizen participation. Most towns generally operate with the town meeting form of government, where the registered voters in the town act as the town legislature, and a board of selectmen acts as the executive of the town. The community is invited to gather and decisions are made at the annual town meeting.

Communities also deliberate and make decisions about community issues such as planning for a new development project, school-related topics, and local budgets outside of the annual town meeting. Community members must have an opportunity to participate in the discussion and decision-making, and community leaders have a responsibility to reach out and engage their citizens. Residents often have personal knowledge or experience with a community issue; ideas, alternate plans, or solutions not previously considered; suggestions for resources; or offers to lend their skills to projects and tasks. Community interest, understanding, and support for an issue, project or program will increase with engagement of citizens.

Traditional Engagement – bringing people together in a meeting format

Engagement processes abound: visioning sessions, forums, charrettes, issues open houses, world cafés, and study circles to name a few. All of these foster broad public participation, but each has a unique format and purpose. Within the format, you can use a variety of tools such as live polling, deliberation, asset mapping or dot voting. All, however, require planning, knowledge of the format, and a facilitator.



Benefits

- Increases public understanding and support for an issue
- Local decisions reflect the interests of the community
- Allows different perspectives to be represented
- Builds accountability and trust
- Identifies shared community concerns, interests, and goals
- Creates strong, healthy, vibrant places to live, work, learn, and plan
- Allows for creative problem-solving
- Increases social capital
- Develops new community leaders
- Helps in the discovery of community assets, skills, and resources



Community Forum

A forum is a meeting where ideas on a specific topic can be discussed. It is widely promoted throughout the whole community. There is sharing of information, knowledge and ideas. Often there is priority setting based on what is discussed.

Things to consider when planning a community forum

Purpose: Determine the purpose of the forum. Be careful not to add other topics as it can become confusing for participants and information about multiple topics will be less robust. Focus on your topic.

Date and Time: The date and time should be set at least 6 weeks in advance and be one that will attract many people. A forum should be in the early evening or on a Saturday to attract those who are working during the day. Be aware of regularly scheduled community meetings that you do not want to conflict with such as select board, library trustees, or conservation commission. Also be aware of school and sporting events. Some conflicts are unavoidable, but you want to be thoughtful to minimize conflicting scheduling. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday are usually best. Forums should be 2 to 2 1/2 hours in length.

Location: The location for the community forum should be a place that

feels “neutral” to people such as a school or library. You want people to feel comfortable that their voices will be heard. The location must be ADA accessible. In addition, there should be ample parking and the building should be easy to find. The room should be large enough to accommodate a large number of people for discussion. Consider the acoustics of the space, and determine if a microphone or sound system is necessary. Chairs and tables should be adult-sized and comfortable and furniture should be able to be rearranged. Consider if your community forum will include breaking into smaller groups for discussion. If so, identify a space that allows for this either with a larger room or additional rooms for breakout groups. It is often helpful to do a walkthrough of the space when determining if a location will work.

Food and drink: Yes! This is important to provide for those partici-

pating. You can set a small budget to do this or the organizing committee can ask for donations from local businesses. This is a good way to get the businesses involved. You do not need to provide dinner (there is not time!) but a snack and drinks are appreciated.

Facilitators: It is best to have a neutral facilitator run the meeting and discussion. Too often people feel that they cannot have an open exchange of ideas if someone with a strong view on the topic is leading the meeting.

The facilitator will take the lead in developing the format and materials in partnership with the community. Small group discussions are the best way to give everyone a chance to talk and listen. Small groups also allow for prioritizing actions, ranking decisions and recruiting new volunteers for the community effort.

Providing Information to Inform the Discussion

Some topics may require providing background information to inform your participants before the discussion. Use data and reliable information to inform your participants. Consider using a **brief** presentation, handouts, maps or other visuals to help inform the discussion.

Managing difficult discussions or disruptive people

A good facilitator will introduce and use ground rules to help keep everyone participating. Ground rules include taking turns speaking, active listening, being respectful and polite, being concise, and staying focused and on task.

Who to invite

Inviting the public to community discussion and decision-making can be challenging because, ideally, everyone should be included. So, where do you start to engage everyone in your community? Consider who may be most affected by or interested in your issue. Think about the civic infrastructure of your community:

- Faith-based groups
- Library
- Town boards
- Boys and girls scouts
- 4-H Clubs
- Recreation groups
- Neighbors
- Schools
- Businesses
- Hospitals
- Nonprofits
- Civic groups
- Service groups
- Senior center

Some community members may have never participated in community discussions before and may be underrepresented in decision-making. Underrepresented community members may include youth, seniors, minorities, veterans, limited income populations, and residents with disabilities. The list may be different in your community. Make a special effort to include all community members. Make an effort to go to them to talk at a time and location convenient and comfortable for them. An organization or leader with experience connecting with the community may be your best first contact, as you may find a greater level of trust. Take the time and do the planning to build these important new relationships. Underrepresented populations have ideas, concerns, and insights of great value.

Name your forum

Give your forum a title specific to your community and discussion. Examples include:

- Downtown Rochester: A Community Conversation
- All in for Alton
- Candia 2026: Come shape Candia's next decade!
- Franklin for a Lifetime: Create a community for all ages



How to get the word out

Use a variety of ways to market your community forum. Place posters around the community – in the Town Hall, library, churches, businesses and in the schools. If your group uses social media, post the flyers on Facebook or Twitter. Post the community forum information to the town calendar. Most of all, reach out to friends, neighbors, coworkers, and others personally to encourage them to attend the community forum. We find that word of mouth is the best way to get people to participate in a community forum.



What to include on a flier or promotion piece

- Title of the forum and an explanation of the session
- Date, time, location, parking information
- RSVP - It's important to know how many people will attend
- Contact name for more information
- Town logo, Extension logo, Partner logo

What supplies to bring

- Registration table. Keep track of who attended the forum with a sign-in sheet and record names and email addresses for future communication.
- Nametags help create a warm and inviting atmosphere and help people learn new names. Nametags can also be used to randomly assign participants to small groups with a number or colored sticky dot.
- Participant materials – agenda, handouts, etc.
- AV/Sound System/Computer
- Easels and note paper for scribing
- Supplies for food - plates, cups, napkins, utensils

Follow up after the forum

Following the community forum, make an effort to stay engaged with community members who attended to build relationships. Engage with participants soon after the community forum to share action group meetings and let people know how they can stay involved. Be sure to let participants know how their input will be used and share a copy of the report. Post the final report on the town website and place paper copies around the community to share results of the community forum with others who were unable to attend.