

Community Economic Development

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Information Brief #6, April 2018

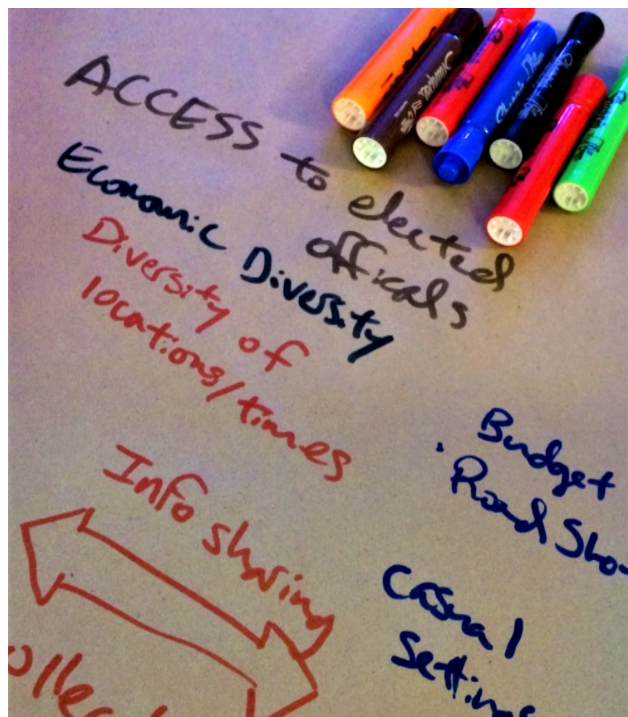
Community Outreach & Engagement

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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.

What is outreach?

Outreach and engagement are two distinct ways to connect with your community. Outreach is one-way communication that tells community members about an issue, problem, opportunity, or decision. Outreach can be postcards sent to homeowners, fliers placed throughout a community, website postings, and meeting announcements, for example. Community leaders inform the public of an upcoming discussion and invite them in to comment or participate. Many communities require this important step in working closely with residents. Only doing outreach for community decision-making is yielding very limited results. There is often low turnout at public and community meetings – even those where there has been robust outreach. Community members have many obligations and are increasingly unlikely to go to a traditional evening meeting. Outreach paired with other engagement strategies will bring many more voices and ideas into the decision-making process.

Benefits of Outreach and Engagement

- 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



What is engagement?

Community leaders often look for ways to broaden public participation. Public engagement can lead to broader participation and wider community input in decision-making. Through deliberate, well-planned public engagement, community members become informed about, participate in, and influence public decisions. Community members go beyond just knowing about a pending decision to participating in the decision-making process—they become a part of the community change. The engagement process includes listening, discussion, deliberation, and decision-making. Successful community engagement builds relationships in the community, which, ultimately, strengthens the community's social fabric and develops new leaders.

Expanding who participates in community decisions

Inviting the public to community discussion and decision-making can be challenging because, ideally, you should include everyone. So, where do you start to engage everyone in your community? Consider who may be affected by or interested in your issue. Think about all of the civic infrastructure that makes up your community such as schools, businesses, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, civic groups, service organizations, senior center, faith-based organizations, library, town boards, boy and girl scouts, 4-H, recreation organizations, and others. Invite a contact from each organization to the discussion. Also, ask them to encourage their respective networks to participate. Your outreach and engagement effort should reach out to all of these groups but remember to reach out (send postcard, flier etc.) *and* engage (ask them directly) for the greatest success.



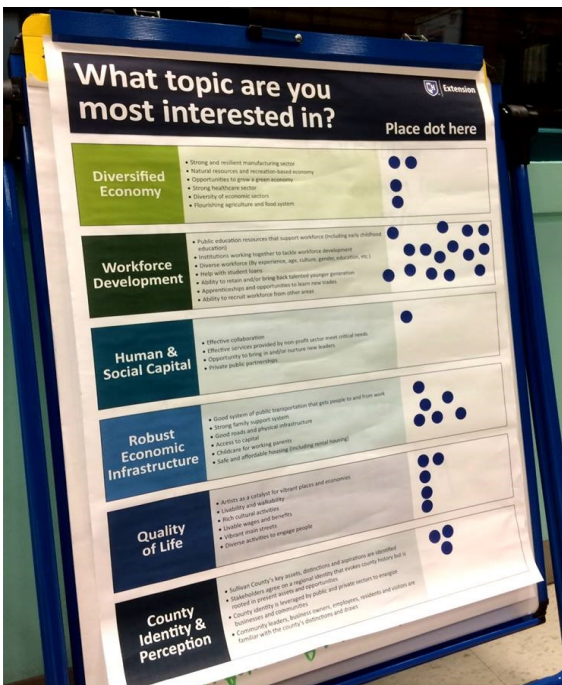
Some community members may have never participated in community discussions before and may be underrepresented in decision-making. Underrepresented community members may include youth, seniors, minorities, veterans, limited income populations, and residents with disabilities. The list may be different 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.

Ways to engage

Engagement should be neutral – it is not advocacy work or advocating for a certain view. It opens up the discussion and encourages broad participation. Consider the format for engagement—the methods you choose should reflect your purposes and engagement goals. Do you want your community to dive deeply into a complex issue or just gauge their reaction to a pending change, issue, or idea? Be sure to fit the process to your participants and your goal. All methods have value as long as they help you build relationships and allow the public to share their thoughts.

Traditional Engagement – bringing people together in a meeting format

Engagement processes abound: visioning session, forums, charrettes, issues open houses, world café, and study circles to name a few. All 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.



Engaging Community members in new and different ways

There are other forms of engagement beyond the public or community meeting, most of which involve going to community members to gather information, ideas and feedback. Many communities have used surveys as a tool. Surveys are helpful but can be costly to develop and administer and may have low response rates.

Communities are increasingly using faster, less expensive and often volunteer driven engagement techniques to reach a broader, often more diverse audience. Communities can use dot voting on posters distributed throughout the town to gauge what people are thinking on a topic. Storytelling circles will yield a great deal of information. By sharing stories about a topic, a relationship is built between those participating and those seeking the input. Crowd sourced story maps allow people to add a photo with comments to a map to share information about locations in a community. Engaging school children through art and drawing will gather the ideas of this often-underrepresented group.

The most representative and well-supported local decision-making includes outreach, traditional and new engagement techniques. When combined, there are more voices and differing points of view represented in decisions. This also leads to broader community support on ideas to improve communities.

Tips for Success at Engagement Events

- Select the right location – it should be neutral and easy to access
- Use a trained facilitator to manage the event
- Use ground rules such taking turns talking, active listening, being respectful
- Share the agenda and be clear on what you want to accomplish
- Use data and reliable information to inform your participants
- Develop clear and concise questions using plain language – no jargon
- Have a snack and refreshments available
- Tell them how you will use what you have heard



Next steps after you have engaged your community

After your engagement efforts, continue to engage with your participants and the wider community. First, be committed to using the insights, ideas, and input from the session in your planning and decision-making. Thank participants and ask them to stay involved by joining an action group or following up on their recommendations. Those who participated will want to know how things will change or what the result of their participation is. Share your report, publicize your decision, and demonstrate how you used what you learned – show participants the impact they have had.

Tips for Engaging after your Public Session

- Keep working to build these community relationships.
- Ask participants to sign up for email updates or to follow you on social media.
- Ask participants to share their experience with others.
- Ask participants to engage again – even on different topic.
- Suggest participants take on a new role in the community such as leading a group or joining a board.
- Set up action committees immediately so participants have a role.



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