

# International City/County Management Association

## Engaging the Unengaged: Developing a Community Engagement Strategy



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It can be difficult to get citizens to attend public meetings and when they do attend they sometimes seem to be frustrated and angry. But we are doing the best we can to inform them and ask for input and participation, right?

When citizens are skeptical about their government, it is the local government manager's job to reach out and find ways to welcome their community members into the work of government. So, think beyond "three minutes at the microphone" and begin developing an engagement strategy that would make you want to get involved.

Here are suggested steps for creating a solid engagement program for your community:

1. **Find out where people are and go to them.** Not everyone has the time or inclination to go to a 7 pm meeting at city hall to learn about a project or express his or her opinion. While public hearings will always be a legal requirement for most of us, look for alternative times and locations to reach out to the public and engage them in a dialogue. You would be surprised what you can learn by spending a few hours talking with people at the local coffee shop, youth soccer game or community pool. Additionally, there are many groups that already exist in your community (homeowners associations, civic and service organizations, and faith-based organizations) that would welcome a visit from a representative of their local government.
2. **Create "places" for small-group conversations.** People generally feel more comfortable having genuine conversations when they can get to know one another through small-group conversations and find common ground. These opportunities don't just happen but require managers to "design" meetings and processes to encourage and support small-group conversations.
3. **Recruit stakeholder groups beyond the "usual suspects" through personal invitations.** Whether we call them the "usual suspects" or "frequent flyers," we all have the "regulars" that we can count on to attend our public meetings. While we appreciate the views of these folks, they may or may not be representative of the entire community. Expand the number of viewpoints you are hearing by extending personal invitations to key stakeholder groups to participate in processes, meetings, etc. Just remember that these invitations don't come in the form of a "legal advertisement" or "public hearing notice" and are more personal in nature.
4. **Create a comfortable environment for participants and don't forget the importance of hospitality.** Never underestimate the power of having a "greeter" or the importance of having food to welcome people to a meeting or event. Something as simple as a tray of cookies and a cup of coffee can help set the tone for a positive conversation. Additionally, the setup of the meeting room can do much to level the playing field for participants and to create a more comfortable environment for participants.
5. **Use both online and face-to-face engagement strategies.** An effective engagement strategy uses both online tools and expanded opportunities to have face-to-face dialogue with stakeholders. Look at opportunities that encourage a "dialogue" or engagement of the community not just sources through which you "push" out information to people. Reaching out to the community through activities that invite, welcome and meet them in their own neighborhoods can serve to enhance an engagement strategy by local governments.

For more information on community engagement, check out [ICMA's Center for Management Strategies](#) and the [citizen engagement](#) topic page on the Knowledge Network.