

International City/County Management Association

Five Tips for Effective Community Engagement



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It is difficult for even the most loyal citizen to know what is going on in his or her community and contribute effectively to local decision making with simply "informational approaches." While information is important, we stop short of true engagement when all we seek to do is inform people about what is going on in the community.

Here are some tips for effective community engagement that were covered in a recent workshop:

1. **No "one-size-fits-all" approach works as well as a comprehensive program for engagement.** While that sounds intuitive, engagement should be approached comprehensively and matched toward the intended purpose, outcomes desired, and promise you are willing to make to the public in the engagement effort. Two documents, the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation and the Spectrum of Public Engagement Activities by the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, offer insight into the various types of approaches that should be part of an effective engagement strategy. These documents can be found in the [CMS Resource Library](#) under planning for civic engagement.
2. **Common agreement must exist between the local government owner and the public on what role the public can serve in an engagement effort.** Everyone needs to understand the purpose of the engagement effort. If the goal is to "inform" the public about an activity/project, they need to understand that. If the goal is to "consult" the public then they need to understand that they will be listened to and provided feedback as to how they influenced the decision. If the goal is to "collaborate" with citizens, then they need to understand that they can provide advice and innovation in formulating solutions, which will be incorporated into the decision making to the greatest extent possible. The key here is both the local government and the citizens understanding the roles that they will play in the process.
3. **All local governments need a long-term engagement plan that is not crisis-driven.** We all work hard to engage our citizens when we are confronted with a crisis, but this type of work needs to be sustained over time and undertaken in good times as well as bad. This helps to build community and momentum for citizen support and assistance in the work we do.
4. **Use a multi-sector approach to engagement by reaching out to existing groups in the community, including homeowners associations, civic groups, service clubs, and the faith-based community.** When we involve people from organizations that have a vested interest in their community, they in turn help to reach out to others thereby building a solid network for embedded and sustained engagement in the community.
5. **Incorporate both online and face-to-face opportunities.** Effective engagement strategies will involve both types of interaction. Make sure your online efforts support face-to-face opportunities and not replace them.

ICMA will be hosting another full-day civic engagement workshop on July 17 in Boston, Massachusetts. Get more information [here](#).