How Civic Engagement Transforms Community Relationships

InFocus

Civic engagement means different things to different people. This article addresses civic engagement initiated by a city or county government with its residents. (Civic engagement also happens without city involvement when citizens are involved in a service club or are volunteering.) This article complements the white paper, "Connected Communities," produced by the Alliance for Innovation, a partner organization to ICMA. The purpose of this InFocus is to give readers hands-on information on how local government staff can build upon or expand their understanding and skills of civic engagement.

This InFocus describes what civic engagement is and what it is not. The report describes the benefits to cities, the challenges, and why some people resist civic engagement. It also defines different levels of civic engagement, offers tips on how to lead a civic engagement event, and discusses new roles for staff. Also included is a discussion of the biggest barriers to civic engagement and some stories and case studies.

ICMA
PRESS

Civic engagement and community building: What is the relationship?

It is important to understand that when civic engagement is done well, you will also begin to build community among the participants. Civic engagement and community building are the flip sides of the same coin. Regardless of which area is emphasized first, it will lead to the other. One way to understand the subtle differences is that community building builds the foundation (i.e., social capital) necessary to have quality civic engagement. Community building holds the citizens together during the time frames between civic engagement processes. Community building is discussed at length in a 2009 InFocus report[1].

Civic engagement: What it is and is not

Be open to outcome, not attached to outcome.

—Angeles Arrien[2]

There are two common misconceptions about civic engagement to address. One misconception is the "Institutional Control Model." This model is best described by a quote from the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan: *"Civic engagement is a device whereby public officials induce non-public officials to act in a way the public officials desire."* Unfortunately, many staff members and elected officials share this inaccurate description of civic engagement.

The second misconception is the false model, "Neighborhood Organizing Model." This model involves lobbying or pressuring an elected body to make a decision. The father of community organizing, Saul Alinsky, once described CE with this scenario: *"If you have a vast organization, parade it before the enemy and openly show your power. If your organization is small do what Gideon did: conceal the numbers in the dark but raise a clamor that will make the listener believe that your organization numbers many more than it does. If your organization is too tiny even for noise, then stink up the place."* Most public officials fear this situation will occur when trying to engage their citizens and often choose not to tread into the civic engagement waters.

The Hardwood Institute of Public Innovation has a good definition of true civic engagement: *"Civic engagement is appropriate when an agency is seeking to learn from*

Ed Everett is a community engagement consultant/facilitator and senior fellow at Davenport Institute of Public Engagement and Civic Leadership. A nationally known expert in the areas of community building and civic engagement, he has spoken at numerous state and national conferences on these topics, led successful training programs in these areas, and written on community building. He is passionate about helping cities and communities understand and implement successful community building and civic engagement strategies. Ed uses his thirty-four successful years in local government (including twenty-four years as a city manager) to share his research and practice in these fields.

Recently retired as the city manager of Redwood City, California, after sixteen years, he was awarded ICMA's highest award, "Award for Career Excellence" in 2007. During his career, he has also served as city manager of Belmont, California; assistant county manager for Washoe County, Nevada; and fire chief for Palo Alto, California.

---

the public. But learning is more than simply soliciting input, adding up the responses, and using the data to make a decision that is allegedly supported by citizens. It is about gaining and using public knowledge."

Civic engagement is about citizens talking to citizens. The role of staff or elected officials is to pose the right questions, listen, and learn from the public. Staff and elected officials who sit at the front of a room and only answer questions while not actively soliciting input from participants are not engaging in civic engagement.

Civic engagement is **not**:

- Selling an idea, program, or policy to the public
- Convincing residents to vote for a bond measure or tax override measure
- Convincing people to support a plan or idea of the staff or council
- A meeting where people gather to complain, blame, or find fault
- Gathering *more* or *different* people only to have the same old discussions
- A process where the staff or council always controls the outcome
- Lobbying the elected body.

There is nothing wrong with any city or county engaging in the first three activities described above. However, they are functions appropriate to marketing and public relations and are not examples of civic engagement.

Civic engagement does not, cannot, and will not happen at a council or planning commission meeting. Instead, it needs to happen outside of these venues. Although there are laws that require public input at public meetings, it is critical not to confuse these requirements with legitimate civic engagement. Three minutes at a microphone is not civic engagement. Council meetings are the community's business meetings. If there is good civic engagement prior to the council meeting, a city will have a better community business meeting.

Civic engagement is not a new program that gets added to your plate. It is not about doing civic engagement. Rather, it is a way of operating—a change to the process you use to get your job done.

Benefits of civic engagement

There has to be value added to expend the efforts to civically engage citizens. Powerful benefits to using civic engagement include:

- Achieving greater buy-in to decisions with fewer backlashes such as lawsuits, special elections, or a council recall.
- Engendering trust between citizens and government, which improves public behavior at council meetings.
- Attaining successful outcomes on toxic issues, which helps elected officials avoid choosing between equally unappealing solutions.
- Developing better and more *creative ideas and solutions*.
- Implementing ideas, programs, and policies faster and more easily.
- Creating involved citizens instead of demanding customers.
- Building community within a city.
- Making your job easier and more satisfying.

Why is civic engagement hard to do?

The hope is that we are headed into a future where government's orientation is "community as partner" and the public actually see themselves as "citizens" rather than "customers." Citizens are anyone who works and lives in our community—corporate/businesspeople as well as residents. All people who live within our communities are citizens of our communities.

How did our public come to see themselves as customers? The private sector was the first to realize that providing high-quality customer service and saying that the customer is "always right" is very good for business. Many of us in the public sector believed this orientation toward our residents made sense, and we emulated the private sector. We then trained our staff to treat our residents like customers. When people are treated like customers, whether by business or by local government, they become customers. When they are told that they are always right, they come to expect to be served exactly the way they want to be served. This mindset has caused them to lose their sense of being responsible citizens and accountable for their community. Unfortunately, this change has made civic engagement difficult due to the following factors:

1. **Distrust:** Public officials have not been straight with citizens for a long time as they have tried to sell, convince, or market their ideas, programs, and policies under the disguise of civic engagement (as Senator Moynihan observed). The public has seen through this ruse. There is also the general societal distrust of government with which public officials must contend.

2. **Role clarification:** Civic engagement is very difficult to achieve when residents are treated as customers and not citizens. In order for civic engagement to work effectively, residents need to start acting as citizens and not as customers.

3. **Attitude and behavior:** Staff and elected officials will have to change their attitudes of the "public" in order to change some of their behaviors that are not productive. Likewise, citizens will have to change some of their attitudes of government in order to change their behaviors. Without behavior changes by all parties, civic engagement will be ineffective.

4. **Perceived loss of control:** Too often staff or elected officials feel that they are giving up control when they truly engage their public.

Challenges of civic engagement

> *Pay attention to what has heart and meaning.*
>
> —Angeles Arrien

Although there are challenges to implementing a civic engagement process, it is still possible to benefit from its use. Recognizing these challenges will put you on the right path for the positive exchange of ideas.

Time: It may take longer to make decisions using civic engagement, but only in the short run. Staff and the elected body often move quickly in deciding an issue only to find that the public is upset and angry about the decision. Many public officials have experienced the lawsuit or ballot initiative to negate a decision, which ends up taking much longer than a well-designed civic engagement process.

Over the years, many studies have been conducted comparing U.S. and Japanese businesses. These studies have revealed that U.S. businesses spend about 20 percent of