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Civic Engagement - Keep Looking for What Works

They say that living in a small town means everyone knows you and you know everyone. As a manager of a small community, I can attest that there is truth to this statement. The people that live and work in the community truly love and care for the town and the people that are in it with passion and vigor. With that said, you would think that civic engagement would be simple – put the information out and they will come! Spoiler alert: it's not.

I have had the opportunity over the years to serve in communications/civic engagement roles with small (1,000 residents) to large (180,000 residents) communities and they all face the same challenges: how do you get people interested in getting involved?

This is a complicated question to answer – no matter the size of your community. The first challenge is that information – how we send it and how we consume it – has changed dramatically over the years, and quickly and continually evolves. We dedicate resources to stay on top of communication techniques that work for our communities, who are also evolving and changing. The second challenge is that we are constantly bombarded through all modes of communications – e-mails, hardcopy flyers and newsletters, text messages, phone calls, ads, social media, billboards, etc. Everyone is trying to get everyone's attention through every possible means. Top it off with a pandemic and an interesting political environment and it can be hard to find a way to break through the noise.

Regardless of these challenges and regardless of your community size, location, demography or any other factor, a tried-and-true civic engagement method is to meet them where they are. The classic public meeting at City Hall held on a Tuesday around dinner time does not draw the crowd one would hope. As we know, the point of these meetings (other than being legally required) is to inform the public and get their feedback on important issues so the governing body can make informed decisions that may impact the community for generations to come.

We put the information out and they don't come. What do we do? Keep pushing forward. Keep brainstorming. Keep trying new things. Keep working toward what works for your unique community.

As an example of meeting them where they are, in a previous community I served, each year from around May to September, we would host Community BBQs. These BBQs were set up on Wednesdays from around 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. (or so) and would be held at local neighborhood parks/HOAs throughout the town. Staff and Board Members would attend these weekly events and feed the community with catered local fare and talk about what was going on in the town and what concerns they had – all while their kids played and neighbors ate, talked, and laughed together.

Sometimes there were a lot of people; sometimes there were only a handful. Sometimes staff provided more formal presentations; sometimes we kept it casual. Either way, it created an opportunity to meet our citizens where they were and for residents and staff to learn and share with one another. It created a sense of community for neighbors. It bonded the town government with the people it serves. It also sparked an interest from community members to become more involved in local government through volunteering to serve on Committees and Commissions, helping at community events, interning or working for the town government, or even running for an elected position.

This event series was a commitment on the staff's part to schedule, coordinate, broadcast, and host and attend these all around the community. With the energy, compassion, and dedication to serve their community, they did it with a smile and with a desire and passion to be responsive to and engaged with the community they serve. It worked for them.

This may not work in your community. Or maybe you've implemented a similar program, but the structure is different in order to fit your unique community's needs.

In my current small-town community, civic engagement doesn't get easier just because we have fewer people to engage; it's just as challenging to spark that engagement. We do, however, continually search for what works for our special community. We may not host Community BBQs (yet!), but we have a Mayor who sends out very popular e-newsletters and hosts a podcast educating listeners on recent government activities. We have an Events Director who works side-by-side with our active business community and develops new unique events where residents, businesses, visitors, staff, and elected officials mingle and build community. We have dedicated staff and police officers that visit businesses and get to know our residents. We have committed volunteers who support our community events, serve on our boards and commissions, adopt-a-spots and regularly engage with the town.

The times we are living in are hard both professionally and personally. Dedicating time and effort to your family and to your community will always be a balancing act. As public servants, we must continue to hone our craft and create opportunities to engage and harness the power of own unique communities. Always keep looking for what works.