

Creating Sustainable Civic Participation

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Local governments are working to find ways to create sustainable civic participation. Some have taken steps to create programs and initiatives that gain the sentiments of their respective citizenry. However, sustainable civic participation is more than gaining the sentiments of citizens, or the perspectives of activist. Obtaining sustainable civic participation comes from inclusive and interactive engagement.

An inclusive approach to civic participation seeks the input in the beginning with an open mind and clear ear for the needs and desires of the people. Further, interactive engagement works with citizens to find resources beyond offices of City Halls, and looks within the neighborhoods and communities of the city. Across the country there are examples of citizens using additional resources to develop solutions.

The citizens of Alexandria, VA., created ACTion Alexandria a web-based platform that brings together neighbors and local nonprofit organizations to exchange ideas, coordinate efforts, and solve problems in our community. Oakland Crimespotting is a resource, created by citizens, that uses an interactive map of crimes in Oakland and a tool for understanding crime in cities.

Historically, government has had a “shoot first, ask questions later”, approach to citizen participation. In other words, government identifies the problem, develops the solution, solidifies the funding, and then garners the support of the citizens. This approach only focuses on the needs, and doesn’t promote inclusion, or interaction from citizens. Also, it puts government in an increasing position of being the “doer” of all things. This may lead to a disengaged citizenry, or citizen creating platforms to bypass government. Either outcome doesn’t result in sustainable citizen engagement.

According to data collected of over 200 communities, by the National Research Center, 76% of those surveyed do not attend local public meetings and 81% have not contacted their local elected official to express their opinions.

Sustainability is as strong as the capacity to maintain. Therefore, sustainable civic participation is

rooted in identifying and enhancing the capacity of citizens. The City of Raleigh offers two programs that focus on capacity building. The Neighborhood College allows citizens the opportunity to learn about each of the city's departments, their functions and how they interact with citizens. The Citizens Leadership Academy is a training program that helps develop neighborhood and community based leadership skills. The combinations of the two programs have resulted in participants taking a variety of leadership roles in their communities, created new platforms to engage local government, and taking advantage of opportunities to participate in local government leadership roles through boards and commissions.

Civic participation will have a difficult time flourishing if it is an "us against them" approach by either local government, or citizens. We are all in this together, and must see ourselves in the solutions that enhance participations, encourage community development, and strengthens the connection between government and citizens.