

Filling the empty rooms

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Covering town and county board meetings for the local newspaper might be one of the most boring jobs in the world. Convinced I could be the next Seymour Hersh, I took a job as a reporter when I was 23, in the county of less than 35,000 people where I was born. It took exactly one school board meeting, two town meetings and one county meeting to utterly disabuse me of that idea.

There isn't anything wrong with county and town meetings, exactly; the issues are important, albeit minor, and writing about speed bumps, scholarships, trash pickup and parking is almost a public service in and of itself. No, it was really just the public comment sections that got me down.

In North Carolina, each meeting of a local government opens with a public comment period. Even reporters who are paid to listen don't like to be there. The "usual suspects" come up - what we called the same three or four people complaining about the same three or four issues - and that was on a good night. On a worse night, though, you'd hear the chairman ask if there was any public comment, his voice echoing as he looked expectantly out at...your duly elected representatives, your town manager, your public works director, your attorney, and your reporter.

No public comment. Next item of business.

Not long after that, I gave up on becoming Mr. Hersh's successor and started working in local government. Only then did I realize what an uphill battle faced us when trying to get people involved in the things that most affect them. Even in popular, politics-neutral projects, like a long-requested Greenway trail, I had to be creative in planning workshops and meetings - practically begging the local churches to put an announcement in their services, varying times and locations. It is, unfortunately, entirely possible to spend weeks advertising, ordering hand-made refreshments and coffee, and preparing your maps and markers, only to show up to an empty room. It was almost, as many people told me at the time, more trouble than it was worth.

As the youngest member of this group, with some government and nonprofit experience, I'm midway through my Master's degree. I want to learn from others about new methods, harnessing social media and online community engagement tools, and making our agencies responsive and resourceful. In whatever field I work in, I want to see people in line to speak up - I want to be able to fill the empty room, so to speak, in all the projects I do. I'm curious about how others with more experience have overcome the "empty room" phenomenon.

There is so much apathy and despair for politics at the higher levels, especially in my generation. Yet there's also so much potential for a rekindling of involvement at the local level. Hopefully, through this group, we can all learn from one another on how to bring people back to a place where they are invested and involved.

Have you ever been the one to help that transition from the empty room to a meeting that got people involved and invested? I'd love to hear your story!