

Moving to Cary From Rural NC: Urban and Rural Approaches to Citizen Engagement

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I recently moved to the Town of Cary from a rural area in Western North Carolina. To say that things are different would likely be the understatement of the year; Cary has over 155,000 people at last count, and my hometown had about 2,500.



Yet that doesn't mean that citizen engagement doesn't work: successful engagement in rural areas just looks very different from how it looks in urban spaces.

It's true that the public comment periods prior to each open meeting are about the best way to give your feedback; coming to the meetings in person (on a weeknight, in the middle of dinner) is still about the best way to find out what's going on. Local weekly newspapers provide coverage of decision-making, but online resources for participatory governance are almost nil. There are very basic government websites that aren't optimized for mobile and maybe one social media account (usually created by one enterprising department rather than as part of an overall communications strategy). And if you're appointed to a board, you'll get one mailed letter telling you the dates and times for your meetings, and be expected to show up, with little recognition and no formal orientation.

But what advocates might normally tell people in rural areas - *oh my gosh, we have got to fix that! Let's bring in a consulting firm to do some engagement and outreach!* - isn't necessarily what's best. **These engagement strategies do, to a significant extent, reflect the culture and values of the people who live in rural places.** People talk face-to-face more, even with elected officials, because the population is small enough to make that possible. People meet at gas stations, churches, and grocery stores - not in a formal way, but as threads in a common social fabric that is much stronger than a one-time outreach push would be. And those encounters in a rural area often provide just as much public feedback as a formal strategy for engagement would in an urban one.

People who don't live in rural areas may not always see the unofficial, personal interaction that happens as a key part of an engagement strategy - but when it's done right, it can be just as effective as the online tools that many urban communities are implementing. It's an important lesson for those of us working to increase engagement to remember: that there are different approaches for rural and urban communities, and we'd do well to shape our language and best practices to reflect that.