

Notes from Session on Staying Un-Stuck, Engagement that Works
Vermont Downtown & Historic Preservation Conference
June 5, 2019, 11:15 AM to 12:30 PM
Bethany Church, Montpelier, Vermont
Compiled by Jacob Hemmerick



Session Description

When the public is your customer, it's easy to get stuck. Let's tackle common sticking points, spotlight engagement myths, explore tactics to evaluate a project's needs, and discover innovative methods that sustain community support. Knowing what matters most to customers when it matters most for your project – now that's smart engagement!

Session Panelists

Matthew Perry, Co-Founder & Executive Director, Vermont Arts Exchange
Leanne Tingay, Senior Associate of Programs, Orton Family Foundation
Meagan Tuttle, Comprehensive Planner, City of Burlington

Session Facilitator

Jenna Koloski, Community & Policy Manager, Vermont Council on Rural Development

Session Organizer

Jacob Hemmerick, Planning & Policy Manager, Vermont Dept. of Housing & Community Development

Panel Summary

Panelists were asked to answer four questions:

- **What does “engagement” mean to you?**
- When is it needed?
- **How do you decide what “type” of engagement is needed?**
- What are your top 4 tips, strategies, or tools for effective, inclusive, and meaningful engagement?

Megan Tuttle

- Engagement is a spectrum – it takes different forms depending on what stage in a project, type of project, outcome of the project
- Deciding what engagement is right is ongoing challenge/learning opportunity- always trying new methods.
- [Burlington Public Works Dept, Public Engagement Plan](#) - to operationalize certain types of communications and engagement based on common project types. Spectrum includes Inform-Consult-Involve-Collaborate-Empower. (Include an example of project type and engagement methods)
- Informing the work of many depts. and a more robust Community Engagement Handbook for city-wide staff
- When time, resources, and capacity are limited, it can be difficult to do more than what is required by statute. Key in these situations might be not to think about “what else” can you do, but “how else” can you do it? For example, what does a public hearing look like?
- Think about how you learn about things outside of your work sphere. What channels inform/influence you? Municipal governments often overlook things like social media and free, but popular resources like Seven Days community events.
- Go where there is a captive audience—community picnics, school events, festivals, community partners’ meetings/events. --Especially events with an audience that is not your typical public meeting crowd (i.e. youth slam poetry event, Parent University, etc.)
- Keep evolving! Try it, get feedback, iterate, try again.

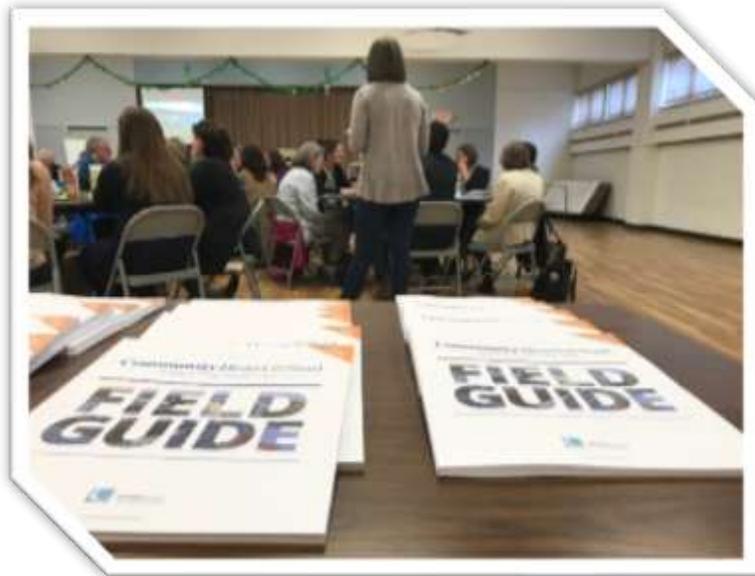


Leanne Tingay

- Engagement for me is about 4 aspects: 1) resident to resident, 2) what matters most to people, 3) finding hidden and missing voices and 4) understanding the data, both thin and thick – making sure it is clean data and making sure it is transparent in the analysis.
- First – Resident to Resident – people respond more openly to people they trust. It also builds relationships and will bring the community to “own” the project/process/initiative you are seeking information upon.

- Next, What matters most will give you what you truly seek – if it is about a comprehensive plan – understanding that open spaces, for example, are what matter most to people -- or recreation, or even the people themselves (that small town feel) -- in which case you might be talking about how and when people gather. If you are keeping what matters most in the forefront – then you will not mistake what the data is telling you.
- Finding Hidden & Missing voices – if you go to the STP's (Same Ten People) you are operating in a bubble of insanity (doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.) What do people say about why something will not work in their community, “not enough money or not enough volunteers.” Really making the true effort to go out to people, neighborhoods, community areas to find people that do not come to meetings. Understanding what diversity is – from not just race, ethnicity or religion but also age, income, education level, access to transportation, physical or mental abilities and even extroverts vs introverts. This is where you will find new volunteers and leaders, build relationships and trust – and get the answers you seek. And are you tracking it in ways that collects the demographics.
- Finally – it is about data – Thin and thick – do not forget the thick – if you only do your survey or rely on a few people to speak at a focus group – you are not collecting the attributes and benefits to the answers you are seeking – looking for the why.
- Engagement is like a muscle – if you do not exercise it – it will atrophy. It is teaching how to talk in a civil manner and realize they have a voice. I have seen things such as traveling journals go through a trailer park or table tent discussions in coffee houses or drink coasters in a microbrew with a question on the front and people's responses on the back. There are always “issues” that face a community – it is about educating folks – all of it invites the conversation but also invites folks to be involved where they care to be...
- Engagement is digging for data, and how you're talking to a high school student, soccer mom or an elected official is going to vary. So, you need an engagement strategy. One size will not fit all – if you really want to engage in a community.
- Figure out who is in your community before you start out. Do an analysis of the community (not just a stakeholder analysis) to find yes, the demographic info but where are those hidden & missing voices. There is an amazing amount of wisdom out there that does not come to your public meeting. Find the formal and informal groups/networks. Rotary Club (formal network) and new moms gathering at the coffee shop with their kids (informal group) Chamber members (formal group) Book Clubs (informal groups) – churches, business leaders, non-profits, arts organizations, - and then who are the connectors – who are the folks who can connect into those groups – tapping into the trust factors – people talk and engage with people they trust – and change only happens at the speed of trust.
- Create an engagement strategy, and keep it FUN!! – now that you know who is in your community – how should you engage with them. Do a block party in a section 8 housing complex – bring a vet along, free rabies shots and quick checkups on pets whose owners can't afford it, someone to repair bikes (oil & perhaps fix the chain) flip some burgers and just talk to folks – don't just drop in, ask questions, and leave – that creates mistrust and misinformation and rumors and yuk! “You've ignored us for a decade – what is it you really want.” Or even “Hey, you need to fix all our problems and what have you done for us lately...” If you have honest conversations through a strategy that includes a number of engagement methods, include trusted connectors – you will build a relationship and even change the character of neighborhoods. Oh and food, food, food – a sure fire method of breaking down barriers.

- Come from a decidedly positive point of view and keep it FUN!!!. Learning to see your community through different eyes – through assets (appreciative inquiry) but it does not mean you do not hear the hopes and concerns – but it puts the community in a frame of mind that looks at what can be done together to appreciate and create a better community. With action!
- Share the stories and the data – this is the secret in the sauce! Sharing stories builds both the conversation and relationships. Example – in Golden Colorado a group of women got together and formed an informal network called “women in saddles.” Their stories of assisting physically and mentally challenged children build skills and self-confidence through work with horses was shared with several service clubs. This led to the two organizations meeting and working together. It can increase community pride. And it builds that community muscle of: how do “we” -- not “you guys” -- find ways of implementing the action plans. Sharing the data keeps the process transparent – if people see the raw data – then they can trust the recommendations and actions. --Actually hold it in their hands at a community summit. The more they touch it – the more they will own it!!!



Matthew Perry

- I am a visual artist.....draw-paint-build. When I make things, I think about how my work engages with people and what message I want to convey or what story I want to tell and I ask myself, who is my audience?
- Engagement is to connect in a meaningful way to fulfill a need or desire.
- Engagement is needed when an individual or a group is in question or looking to gain further knowledge (like today), or when one hits a wall or is struggling.
- I approach COMMUNITY ARTS WORK much like my own work, yet I need to have a bigger toolbox and a variety of creative resources (other people). Not just dancers, writers, musicians, BUT chefs, farmers, construction workers, landscapers (get to know the janitor when doing a school residency).
- BUILD TRUST
 - Create your way in (your strategy).
 - Identify your audience (I've worked with Firemen, Farmers, teachers, inmates in prison, children, patients in psychiatric wards, Zoning boards,

Identify their timeline (whether a 1 hr. workshop (like this) or a yearlong project like in Starksboro, VT).

- COMMUNICATION
 - Be at the table, Get on the agenda. Let your voice be heard.
 - As an arts org. there's a saying...if you're not on the table, you're on the menu".
 - Make the approach personal: knock on doors, hang out at the dump. Get on their turf. Find the culture of communication that best fits your audience. (which Soc. Media ??....text younger people). Mail a personal invite. I prefer 3-D presentations over Power Point, avoid clipboards and above all, use humor. I've seen Humor easily breakdown walls and build trust in a short time (no joke).
- ACCESSIBILITY
 - Is transportation needed to get to a meeting?
 - Do we call it a meeting-maybe not, maybe a "gathering".
 - Is childcare needed?
 - What kind of studio is needed?
 - Is food & drink needed? (yes, always). Coffee, beer, lemonade, pizza, potluck, homemade pies....(These are wonderfully accessible things) Doesn't a potluck sound better than a meeting.
 - Is gathering at a vacant lot next to a neighborhood better than the local firehouse or Town hall? Funding: What partners and resources are not obvious but yet are right in front of us? Who wants to be part of this engagement, who needs to be but maybe does not know it? (As a community arts worker) I find....The way in is usually through the back door not the front. Sometimes there is not even a back door and you have to make one).
- LISTEN MORE THAN TALKING
 - Most of the time the people that you are engaging with and the reason you are, is because they are NOT being heard, a need is NOT being met.Everyone has a story, listen to the story. How can these stories be the springboard to engage? Find the coals in the fire and blow on them. Roadside Conversations we piloted poetry as a tool for resident's articulation and discussion of what they value about their neighborhood. It could also be used to better define what residents mean when they say they value "rural character", "working landscapes," etc.

Activity Summary

Following the panel discussion on engagement, participants broke into groups to "air some dirty laundry" on engagement by coming to consensus on a key engagement challenge and identify strategies and solutions to overcome that challenge. This is an exercise Matthew used to facilitating feedback and dialogue in Starksboro. The notes below identify the key challenges and strategies brainstormed at the session, as well as those offered up during the street fair at the close of the conference. Thanks to Leanne and the Orton Family Foundation team for bringing cookie buttons to the session.



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IGNITE THE NEXT GENERATION OF INVOLVEMENT

- Make them feel their contribution is valued and desirable.
- Cultivate mentorship.
- Develop task-oriented volunteer activities.
- Change venues: parks, bars, playground.
- Create volunteer opportunities that are discreet and finite.
- Use easy technology, like apps, Front Porch Forum, etc.
- Use pop-ups to advertise events.

SAME 10 PEOPLE

- Identify connectors and expand partners.
- Nourish and thank those ten people.
- Communicate and celebrate success, big and small.
- Expand the ways in which we communicate.
- Ask people how they get their information and use it.
- Use age-friendly engagement.
- Have an exit strategies for volunteers: succession planning.
- Got a minute, got a morning, got a month: tier level of engagement.
- Go to where the new people are.
- Engage people in limited tasks.
- Be persistent.
- Bring food and drink.
- Make gatherings exciting.
- Make childcare available and invite the kids too.
- Allow children to engage in the plans.

HEARING FROM EVERYONE

- Variety of meeting formats: small groups, clickers, etc.
- Variety of outreach methods/options/technologies.
- Intercept surveys where people are.
- Set up displays.
- Maintain authenticity through transparency: report back, provide feedback, communicate next steps.

DWELLING ON THE NEGATIVE

- Humanize the challenge “help us, help you”
- Remind people about the context/priorities –can help redirect onto a vocal participant – “how would you address this problem?”
- Elevate the positive voices (how do you do this?)
- Demonstrate how you’ve used feedback.
- Empower others to devise a solution.
- Change venue so those voices aren’t the only ones.
- Take the time to understand the “why”

- Take the time to build relationships outside of specific goals.
- Be clear about the “why” of what you are trying to achieve.
- Bring donuts/coffee to the dump.

HOW TO BE: ACCESSIBLE, INCLUSIVE, FORWARD-LOOKING & POSITIVE

- Offer alternative options for input (website, social media, etc.)
- Set useful parameters around questions – don’t leave things too open ended.
- Set clear objectives for a meeting
- Establish firm and transparent timelines: then what’s the next opportunity.
- Go to where the people are.

SUSTAINING ENGAGEMENT FOR LONG-TERM PROJECTS

- Use internet and social media to keep the story alive.
- Use imagery and pictures to show progress.
- Create continuity for transitions.
- Develop community “top 10” list to memorialize projects and keep them alive.
- Use phones for the power of the good!
- Create videos to share the information vs. written.

MISSING VOICES

- Make everyone feel welcome
- Find links with young families – schools, libraries, etc.
- Establish a relationship by asking questions to make [people] comfortable; don’t just dive into getting what YOU want.
- Connect with trusted community leaders
- Hear and respond to what they say is important – give them “a seat at the table” – not just your agenda.
- Choose “safe” familiar spaces to meet – kitchen table conversations.
- Choose safe spaces
- Make sure people feel heard; give feedback.
- Engage people where they are: schools, libraries, neighborhoods, places of worship, etc.
- Food! Potlucks. Their menus. Culturally relevant cuisine.
- Use their language: options for ways to communicate.

