

## Engaging Community and Citizens: Public Involvement

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm delighted to be here this afternoon, to talk to you about Community and Citizen Engagement, otherwise known as Public Involvement. I'll be speaking from a Public Involvement practitioner perspective.

Public Involvement is a subject I feel pretty passionate about because I believe it is an essential element of good governance and the health of a municipality. I'm going to talk about Involvement for about a half hour so that will leave some time at the end of the presentation for questions. So jot those questions down as they bubble up in your mind, and feel free to ask me them at the end of the talk. I welcome it.

My presentation is divided into five sections and addresses the following questions:

- **What** is public involvement?
- **Why** is public involvement valuable to us in the way we govern?
- **Who** should we involve when we engage the public?
- **When** should we engage the public? And,
- **How** do we make public involvement effective and efficient? I'll talk a little about how to plan, actually kick-off the public involvement process, and how to build consensus.

### What is public involvement?

So...what is this thing, we call public involvement? Public Involvement is really all about involving people in issues that interest or affect them. It's as simple as that. The practice of public involvement has, unfortunately over the years, acquired a language all its own. Terms such as citizen engagement, public involvement, public consultation and public participation are often used interchangeably by practitioners. There are subtle differences, but for our purposes it matters not.

I'm going to use the term "Public" in its most general and most inclusive term in a municipal context (i.e. business organizations, institutions, Not-for-profits, general public – folks not affiliated to any association or organization, etc.). "Involvement" represents a continuum or

levels of public involvement methods used to engage the citizens of a municipality in discussions about civic matters that affect them.

Eight specific levels of participation exist, but they can be clustered into three groups: Information Sharing, Consultation and Active Participation.

### **(1) Information Sharing**

It's all about disseminating information to the public. It may involve the following:

- Persuasion to change public attitudes without raising expectations of involvement;
- Educating the public by distributing information to increase public awareness;
- Sharing information to build awareness which is accomplished by distributing information on an organization's position, with the intent of receiving and considering public comments on the stated position.

### **(2) Consultation**

- Two-way communication between an organization and the public based on established, mutually-accepted objectives;
- Opportunity to test ideas or concepts to build knowledge;
- Collaborate to develop solutions to build commitment.(E.g. host public workshops, focus groups).

### **(3) Active Participation**

- Delegate decision making to build responsibility – by transferring to the public, responsibilities normally associated within the organization. (e.g. use of Boards, Expert Panels etc.)
- Share decision making to build ownership – which requires undertaking a process initiated by the public, with the organization accepting the outcome (e.g. creating a Vision for your community, Safe City Initiation, policy or strategic direction).

True public involvement requires a very different mindset, approach and skills than “information sharing”. Good, quality process design and implementation is crucial to the success of any public involvement process.

### **Why is Public Involvement Valuable?**

Public involvement is really in response to increased complexity in our world, our communities. Over the years, there has been a growing movement towards great public engagement in municipal debates. People want to have a say on issues that impact them. They want to have a real voice in helping set the agenda/priorities of the community.

Some of the benefits of public involvement are:

### **1. Better Solutions**

True solutions and innovation no longer lie in one leader or viewpoint, but instead belong to the bigger picture of our communities' collective wisdom. Wise action and finding new solutions for the common good of our communities occurs by tapping into the collective wisdom of our community and co-creating the solutions we need to resolve problems/issues.

Sustainable solutions that serve the community are born in the community. And, lead to better decision-making and/or recommendations.

### **2. Builds partnership and Cooperation**

By building partnership and cooperation with the community, one is able to move priority agendas forward. Let's face it. If history has taught us anything, engaging the public on important issues that concern them, IS time well spent. You not only get good ideas and insights, your ability to move your agenda forward is us ally faster in the long run, if your community has been engaged and involved. However, if you don't consult the community, the public can stymie you, slow things down, until they feel they have been heard.

### **3. Ensures the legitimacy of government actions**

If the public is engaged effectively, the public is better able to understand and support public policies and programs. When the public is involved in decision-making or making recommendations, there is more ownership to the outcome. From a political perspective, this is good because it keeps you out of the proverbial fry pan.

### **4. Leads to increased government accountability**

By increasing public awareness and understanding of public policy changes, options, decisions and results, there is greater accountability. Accountability sheds light on government operations and reduces the likelihood of mistakes, poor decisions, and abuse of power (or potential for abuse of power).

As I've mentioned earlier, there are varying degrees of public involvement (from information sharing to making decisions on issues). Today, public involvement is no longer an option for us who govern. It's just the way we do business. Consequently, public involvement is an essential element to good governance and the health of the municipality. So much so, that it is entrenched in our MGA Act (Sec. 196-199) and speaks to citizen engagement.

## **Who should we involve when we engage the public?**

Many municipalities struggle with this question when they embark on a public involvement process. And, the answer is it all depends. You're familiar with Alice in Wonderland and that famous question posed by Alice:

"Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?" And the response from the Cheshire cat – "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to?" So WHO we involve when we engage the public, depends largely upon you and Council's purpose or strategic intent for a specific policy, project, plan etc. Purpose determines which issue or opportunities are important and which questions matter.

It's important to know there is no single "public". A community is made up a rich diversity of groups and interests. And, the "public" constantly changes; grouping and regrouping according to projects and processes. Good public involvement process invites and engages a full range of community groups and interests in public dialogue and decision-making.

## **When should the public be involved?**

So you're committed to public involvement or at least to some degree of public involvement in the way you operate. And, you're clear on your purpose/intent and need public input.

You're ready. Invite the public to get involved when something is new, large or different and is being proposed in or near their community or where they live. People have a right to know and have their say on important decisions that impact their community. Know that it is unlikely that the entire public in a community will become involved in each and every process that comes along. Why? ---Because folks don't have the time, energy or inclination to attend everything and anything. The public will prioritize what is important to them and participate when they believe they will be affected by a certain decision and where they will have the biggest impact. In the end, it is important to engage the public in identifying policy priorities, when you develop or implement public policies, initiate public work projects, public services or any other civic actions.

Past experience shows us that if people are not invited to participate or the process is not done well, people will demand it. Even though engaging the public can be messy and stressful at times, it is worth it in the end. Agendas results and implementation of solutions tend to run faster in the long run with public input and ownership of results. We've all seen it before, sometimes in our own backyard and sometimes in other community's backyards. They failed to consult the public or they circumvented the process. The result: the public slowed things down. Its to be expected, since the public feel they have a right to be heard and have their input taken seriously since they live with the consequences.

Today, the public expect to share in and be responsible for their decision making in their communities. Engaging the public in meaningful conversation is an integral part of social policy planning.

### **Still... not so sure about public involvement?**

You're not alone. Many municipalities are still leery or fearful of public involvement practices. They don't really believe the public can genuinely add value to the discussion. They think it costly and time consuming. And—they can be right! To make matters worse, we sometimes fear what if the input the public provides us, runs contrary to my Vision, Council's vision or priorities? What then? And, we've all experienced the back lash that the public can stir up – they distrust the decision or outcome. They distrust the process because their recommendation was not implemented. Scary stuff. But – it need not be, all it requires is good management; the ability to manage the public's expectations from the "get go". If Council is clear on their purpose/intent (for a project, policy etc.) and what is expected or needed from the public, this can go a long way to ensuring success.

The public can be informed at the beginning of the Public Involvement activity. In this way, the public understands at the beginning of the process, the limitations placed on them so they do not undertake activities or get upset about not having their pet recommendations endorsed by Council. While there are eight levels of public involvement, engaging the public in decision-making rarely happens (at least in my experience anyways). Most initiatives require public input is collaborative in nature. The public makes recommendations to an Advisory Board, Task Force, Expert Panel, and Council etc. With Council being the ultimate decision-maker as is per the MGA. If expectations are set up front, most people are in agreement of the terms. It's true the public want to have their say, but usually they are content for Council to make the final decision.

### **What does it take to make Public Involvement effective and efficient in a municipal setting?**

One way is to ensure that the process is transparent and valued by all parties – Council, Administration and the public. Best practices suggest that elected officials and Administration join with their citizens and make a commitment to their community and citizens to create a partnership in which the public has a real voice in helping to set the course of the community. To do this, one needs to establish a Public Involvement Philosophy that describes how the organization plans to use public involvement as a tool, to help govern their municipality. In the States some municipalities have enshrined their commitment to public involvement in a "Bill of rights". In some Canadian municipalities they've developed a public involvement philosophy statement and/or developed public involvement policy to demonstrate their organization's commitment to public involvement. As part of that philosophy, Council could set out

expectations, the role of the public in providing input. It makes your process credible and covers your butt. Having a public involvement philosophy and set of principles would go a long way in helping ensure that Council and Administration public involvement process is seen to be substantial and not a form of tokenism.

To help your municipality craft its own philosophy about the use, Council needs to ask itself the hard questions and get clarity on how public involvement fits into its overall municipal governance. Some questions you and Council might want to ponder are as follows:

- What degree of public engagement should we consider as part of the municipal governance process? What works for us?  
Why should a municipality consult the public and what does the municipality plan to do with the information gathered?
- What advantages or disadvantages does public engagement pose for our municipality?
- And, under which conditions should a municipality have to respect the public, in order to successfully obtain public involvement on decisions and issues?

Best practices suggest that the principles of effective public involvement require a municipality to do the following:

- Create a culture of listening, hearing and acting on public input.
- Build collaborative, seek consensus and ensure it is a community-based approach.
- Involve the public early on in the process – ensure the public is involved early when a policy and/or project is being shaped. Don't involve them after important decisions have already been made and little flexibility remains.
- Ensure the Process is Inclusive – Involve a full range of community groups and interest in public dialogue.

Now that you know what public involvement is. Why it's valuable. Who we need to invite and engage. And, last but not least, when we need to do it. It begs the question – How do we plan for it? How do we plan for public involvement in our community?

### **Tips for successful Planning**

Planning for a public involvement is an art and not a science, and requires some skills in the area of public consultation as well as project management. A public involvement plan needs to be designed, processes put in place, and methods selected; the whole effort orchestrated to bring about a successful public involvement event. However, from an elected official's

perspective here are some tips to set your community on the right path, to effectively engage your community.

- Establish a public involvement philosophy and principles and commit to it;
- Have a clearly defined goal/objective. Get clarity about what the issue is. What is the outcome? What do you want the public to experience or take away from the event?
- Take the time to plan before your municipality launches its public involvement initiative in the community. You know the old adage: “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail”; nothing is truer than when it comes to public involvement. If you don’t have the skills “in-house” then hire a consultant to work with your team and harness the resources both inside your municipal corporation, as well as your community.
- Don’t assume you know the answers. You might be pleasantly surprised what the community’s wisdom comes up with!
- Ensure that “form follows function”. Chose the right tool of public involvement. I can’t emphasize that enough. Make sure you really require the public input in decision making. Otherwise, there is the potential is to overload the public so they’ll eventually shut down.
- Ensure that the public involvement initiative aligns with your Municipal Sustainability Plans. The public should only be engaged and providing input on issues that are priorities detailed in the MSP.

### **How does one kick-start the Public Involvement Process?**

Now that you’ve done your groundwork, you’re ready. First, invite the community to provide their input on matters that they care about. And, through that invitation and the process, you’ll inspire a community to boldly move forward on issues or help improve the way they work and live together in the community. Second, host a forum. Ask a wicked question or questions. Hold those tough conversations that are meaningful and matter to the public. Ensure people know what to expect, how to participate, and how their input will contribute to the decision. IT allows people in the community to listen to each other, respond to each other, and in some cases create shared solutions.

From your perspective, this is all good, as you'll get perspectives from differing points of view based on different experiences and knowledge. The end result: discussions are richer and the solutions more sustainable, effective and easier to implement.

## **How to Build Consensus**

A key part of public involvement is the process called building consensus. I talked about consensus at AUMA's November conference but was asked to speak to it again, so I'll do a recap of the session.

Consensus is important because you need the cooperation of your colleagues to move your agendas forwards. The key to building consensus is through the art of conversation. It's our ability to listen, converse and express ourselves effectively to one another. Through the process, we respect our differences and our uniqueness. The value of building and working through consensus is that it enables people to "think together, "to plan", "to work together", so groups are able to make appropriate decisions and plans.

Consensus does not mean total agreement from all participants; not at all. Instead, consensus occurs when all participants are willing to move forward together, even if folks don't agree on all the details. The strength of consensus is its ability to support meaningful conversations; conversations that move us forward to a common understanding.

Building consensus can be used in any type of discussion or meeting. It's not limited to Council meetings, Task Forces or Committee work. The use of consensus is as powerful when it is used with two people, as it is with a whole community. Yes, consensus method can be used to effectively engage a whole community around an issue.

So how can we get good at building consensus? I have seven steps that will help get you there. They'll work for you if you're talking with a colleague over a cafe latte or talking to your constituents at a town hall meeting.

- **Be clear. Know your purpose and strategic intent.** This is the first step in engaging your colleagues/community. Purpose determines which issues or opportunities are important and which questions matter.
- **Mean it. Be honest and have the will to form consensus.** It's difficult to arrive at a consensus in situations where an individual or group are determined to impose their will on everyone else. It's important to set the rules of engagement at the get go.

- **Encourage Participation.** Create rich webs of conversations with your colleagues/community. It can lead to unexpected combinations of new ideas and insights.
- **Explore the critical issues and questions.** Be up front. Deal with the critical issues that need to be dealt with. Discuss them, don't hold back. Ring your ideas forward. Build them into your conversations.
- **Engage all relevant parties in the conversation.** It's important to invite and engage dialogue with diverse groups, so multiple perspectives can be listened to and heard by all.
- **Respect all ideas.** Have your say and encourage others to have theirs.
- **Keep an open mind.** Suspend assumptions and judgements so consensus can form and allow the new to emerge.

Through conversation, we form consensus by focusing on commonalities, not our differences. As we work to build consensus, we respect our differences. Tools/processes exist that one can use to sideline those issues without derailing our chance for advancement. (e.g. AUMA/AAMDC Citizen Engagement Toolkit, Tools like World Cafe, Inquiry Method, Open Space etc – all have tools). Skilful use of collaborative processes for engagement is required so all input from participants can come together in ways that foster coherence without control. Whatever tool/technique you chose to get there, building consensus is all about intent and our ability to advance our agenda, instead of getting mired in in-action.

## Summary

To end the presentation, I'd like to read a poem written by Margaret Wheatley. Margaret is an American writer and consultant who talks about how we can organize and accomplish our work. Her poem, entitled: "There is no Power Greater Than a Community", speaks to engaging the community in a meaningful conversation and is a great summary of what we discussed. Have a listen.

# There is No Power Greater Than a Community

Margaret Wheatley

There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask “What’s possible?” *Not* “What’s wrong?” Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.



Talk to people you know

Talk to people you don’t know

Talk to people you never talk to

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty



Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert in something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations change your world.

Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

In closing, I’d like to thank you for allowing me to have this conversation with you today.