Good Ideas and Strategies for Advancing Civic Engagement with Local Government

From November 2017 FCA Summit Table Rounds

The wide range of ideas generated in Table Round discussions fell into the following overall themes:

A. Resources of colleges and universities in local community:

- Colleges and universities can be resources for local governments - especially counties with limited resources facing rapid growth and changes.
  - They can provide research on how communities best handle meetings and public input on policy issues.
  - The university tradition of helping communities can include expanded research and service opportunities.
- How can colleges and universities serve as a catalyst for civic engagement in communities?
- Add community leaders panel as part of student orientation at large universities - get students involved in interning, jobs, voting.
- Combine meetings of local governments and college/university decision-making groups.

B. Mentoring for citizen awareness and leadership development

- The system may seem transparent to those in the know. But for those on the outside there needs to be outreach based on issues of interest and the context for why it matters, why the can make a difference voting, working in the political process, or seeking office.
- Encourage people to run, let them know what they can run for, how to get started, and the skills they need to be successful running and governing.
- Mentor people to provide the experience they will need to run for office in the future if they are not ready now. Build the bench.
- Working for political campaigns is good starting place to get involved in political activity and eventual seeking elected office.
- Neighborhood

1 Thanks to David Klement, Executive Director, Institute for Strategic Policy Solutions, St. Petersberg College, who compiled the “good ideas” generated at Summit roundtables for each of the 4 civic practice areas.
C. Use of technology

- Redesign web presences of local governments to meet expectations of citizens
- Make it easy to find things the way citizens look for it
- Ask a question/make a suggestion feature
- Facebook group is a forum used by associations to talk to each other. Nextdoor.com.
- Local government uses social media to get the messages out during disasters.
- Utilize social media effectively to reach and inform citizens of boards they can serve on and opportunities for participation.
- The Medium is the Message.
- Cities of Service is a website.

D. Ways to reach more people

- Local government needs to go out to the people, not ask the people to come to us
- Using all the tools to create those spaces for people to participate; local government needs to be there
  - Existing social groups are another resource.
  - Consider using neighborhood canvassing to gather citizen input and invite city meeting participation
- Hosting community block parties to engage citizens
- Citizen committee conversations - you have to connect the committees to actual policy development if you want people to serve
- Develop community coalitions - can serve to educate as well as getting citizens involved
- Reach out to schools with news releases from the local government
- Use examples of consensus building successes in the local area to demonstrate efficacy of good public engagement on an issue to encourage use of a consensus-building process.
- Use the structure that is already in place, provide encouragement and incentives, use the Chamber.
- Ensure there the transparent operation of government your local levels, helps get the word out and learn how to participate

E. Miscellaneous ideas

- Few local officials are full-time positions dedicated to public service - easier if the city or county is larger
- Municipalities need people who understand the value of process and how to engage the public effectively
- What type of city commission or county mission model works best for civic engagement (single member district vs at large member districts, or a mix of both)?
- Would national local government associations be interested in a registration or turnout competition?
- Or do this at a neighborhood level within a local jurisdiction
- Millennials need context so they don’t feel government is not responsive to their perspective or interests.
▪ Use multiple approaches; approach and issues should be based on background of those you are trying to reach.
▪ Grassroots organization/contacts need to be trained/developed, based on personal contacts.
▪ Listen in the community first before trying to engage citizens in action.
▪ Provide a whiteboard at community events, with a specific question to solicit public comments and perspectives.
▪ Better more effective efforts to market the existing services that are offered by government. Often citizens don't know what services and opportunities already exist.
▪ Need to learn that if you don't get what you want, that does not necessarily mean you were not respected and listened to. Consensus can be built but not everyone gets what they want.
▪ Some citizens attack the process when they don’t get what they want.