

“Increasing Local Engagement” Panel, Southern VT Economy Summit (May 23, 2023)

Intro

Around 50 Summit attendees gathered to talk about ways to increase engagement in local government and volunteer-driven projects. Ted Brady opened the session by sharing his perspective on what makes our people-driven local democracies so powerful. Jenna Koloski facilitated a group discussion on the challenges and barriers participants had seen (and experienced) around participation in local government and other civic leadership positions, and then gave examples of strategies that VCRD has honed when it comes to community engagement. The group split up into breakouts to dive deeper into specific topics. Discussion notes are transcribed below.

Overall Challenges – group

Housing, childcare → People → Civic engagement

Liability for those serving

People feeling not qualified and not having adequate training

Succession + knowledge transfer

Accessibility to meetings

Not believing in the institution

The rules and process are alienating

It's so personal and emotional (toll)

Newcomers not used to participatory government or comfortable – unfamiliar w structure and how to get involved

High cost of living + unpaid / low \$

Town meeting is on a work day

The way we share information

Traditional comms = limited audience + engagement – need to update venues

Tenor - win/lose vs. compromise

In an aging town, how can we sustain this kind of government?

Breakout: Recruiting and Engaging New Volunteers – Jen Stromsten, moderator

Recruiting

Personal invitations – direct and personal

Identify who is doing stuff or newcomers who become part of community with a limited commitment (cold call!)

Ask others who to ask – branch out – and keep an eye out
Go to their room / events
Create and promote various ways to contribute
Create new opportunities to elevate people from one volunteer activity to next
Networking in community events
Tell people the results
Know what you are asking – skills, duration, time/week
Wide net – use your “Christmas card list”

Yes! Now what? (Retaining)

Advocate, buddy, mentor who stays with people
Training – general (Robert’s rules); specific (zooming, etc)
Playbook
Mentorship should be structured – a program, checkin and support, touchpoints
Encouragement and reminder of impact
Understand their needs / knowledge
Ask people what they need
Pay attention to their experience – fun, personal

Who does all of the above?

Everyone involved must share and act
But expectation is not set often
Share success stories
Seek partners like colleges

What would help?

Org level decision, discussion and planning to do this work
More time to focus on this together
Overcome assumption of permanence – drive urgency

Effective Community Dialogue and Engagement – Jenna Koloski

Rotating chairs of boards
Parliamentarian / admin that helps w rules - extends beyond terms
Food!
Sustain electronic participation
Technology failing – push to keep Zoom possible
Invite
Controversial / issue
\$ - monetary issues

Go to people: coffee chats, etc

Transparency laws make volunteer committees hard to convene and work within – education

Make succession a responsibility of local officials

Establish common knowledge for boards / officials

ZBA / DBA turn over – need them to take training – it's there

Videos on how to run a meeting – need to be welcoming

Pamphlet on best ways to creatively engage

Participatory budgeting

Replicate ARPA process to engage folks

Youth roles on boards

Focus on 25-44 – meet them where they are, inspire them, invite them

Mentorship

Offer credit for kids to attend meetings

Budgets for communicating, for engagement

Lots of \$ for above

Broadcast all meetings

Building Communications and Trust – Jason Van Driesche, Front Porch Forum

- tension between moving forward and staying the same/gong back

+ common need

- tension between producers and consumers

(Locations for contact)

+ Community center (old HS)

+ General store

+ School drop-off (unless bus)

- Desperate for town to have better communication (Putney)

+ Virtual spaces make dispersed collaboration possible – allows more people to participate

Need young people to help facilitate online collaboration → set targets

Funding for virtual / infrastructure

Trust & commitment to neighbors = bedrock

Common goals

Traditions – tie community together – including building new ones

Accountability and feedback

Time to build trust

Strengthening Municipal Government – Ted Brady

Communications

- Email marketing

- Town newsletter – print and online, for residents and summer folks
- Direct mail

Open houses at town hall – Jericho

Mix of strategies

village/town walkabout

Road signage for events

* volunteer time

Individual invitation – welcome wagon

* consistency – regular events

* fun

Public access and local media

Childcare

Building ongoing relationships

Engage local school and local gov't

Follow up – especially with personal invitations

\$ dedicated to communications

“Path for passion”

Prioritize – find concrete ideas for action

Working with youth

Clear communication

Start with why – how does it benefit everyone?

Education –