

Opening the Door to an Active Constituency

By Karen Hildebrant,
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Strengthening the relationship between local government and its citizens might seem to be such an obvious priority that it hardly needs spelling out. Yet all levels of government have been criticized for being remote from the people, not listening enough and not seeking participation.

Calls for greater government transparency and accountability have grown as public and media scrutiny of officials' actions increases. The public assumes that government officials can and should produce good policy products. And if they don't? Then, as in the marketplace, many people believe that they have the right to look elsewhere.

Numerous recalls around the state may have grabbed headlines during the last couple of years, but less spectacular illustrations of this "customer service" concept include a steady erosion of voter turnout in elections, declining levels of volunteers, less confidence in decisions and lack of participation at board meetings.

American democracy is deeply rooted in the community at a grassroots level. The public is against big, unresponsive government, and a broad consensus is growing for greater reliance on local government and more public participation. Citizens now have access to more information to form their opinions, and they expect government to take their views into consideration when making decisions.

*According to MTA District 19 Director **Tom Zoner**, **Charter Township of Commerce** (Oakland Co.) supervisor, directly engaging citizens is the best way to find out what they are thinking and what they need. "It is vital for the township board and citizens to work together," he said. "Though the township board is ultimately responsible for the final decision, having citizen input and involvement go a long way toward helping the township accomplish its goals."*



The New Citizen

As more and more people move into townships, a new kind of citizen is emerging—and they present a contradiction. They are better informed and more sophisticated in using the political tools of change—like recall petitions—yet are voting in smaller numbers. They expect more and better services. However, they are often reluctant to pay—and are perhaps unaware of the need for—taxes beyond user fees. They want instant government responses to their needs yet are hesitant to fund the operations of government. They exhibit NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) attitudes but are less than enthusiastic about attending public meetings to debate and problem-solve such issues.

For their part, many officials can be as frustrated with the public as the public is with them. Officials may find it difficult to have productive discussions with citizens. They often see constituents who are impatient, emotional, intolerant of ambiguity and complexity, ill-informed, concerned only with their narrow interests, and unwilling to accept unavoidable costs and tradeoffs.

As a result, public meetings often produce little in the way of genuine deliberation. Officials frequently use the opportunity to sell or defend decisions they have already made or feel they will have to make. Citizens can seize the opportunity to criticize, blame, and oppose official action (or inaction).

MTA Past President **Patrick White, Pavilion Township** (Kalamazoo Co.) supervisor, says public participation is often difficult to measure. “Just because they don’t show up at board meetings doesn’t necessarily mean they don’t participate,” he said. “Some residents read about township issues in the newspaper, vote in local elections and chat with a board member in the grocery store. Other residents may stop by the hall or send e-mails and letters.”

Amid the wealth of information on how to build healthy communities, why are so many communities unable to resolve tensions, satisfy diverse constituencies and solve problems? The transition from the traditional leadership model to a new

model of collaborative community leadership is hard. It takes time and commitment from grassroots leaders.

The challenge for townships is to recognize the pitfalls of continuing “business as usual.” We must begin to face the challenge of building stronger, healthier communities. This must be accomplished township by township, and conversation by conversation.

Participation is Possible

Involving the public in the decision-making and judgments of the township may be a difficult task. At the same time, it can also be a rewarding experience, enhancing both the legitimacy of decision-making and the value of what is produced. Effective participation can bring about a better policy direction, improved services, an imaginative way of tackling issues, better understanding and, more broadly, a sense of hope and shared commitment to change.

Yet it is also clear that participation has the potential to run off track. The key is to ensure that participation is done effectively. It is not essential, or even desirable, that every citizen participates all the time. But everyone must have the opportunity to take part, and should feel welcomed and able to influence public decisions.

Citizens as Partners

Engaging citizens in policy-making allows townships to tap into new sources of ideas, information and resources when making decisions. You may be thinking, “This all sounds great, but where do we start?”

To engage people

effectively in policy-making, townships must first invest adequate time and resources to develop and use appropriate tools, ranging from traditional opinion polls and community forums to the newest advances in planning—charettes. (For more on such tools, turn to page 12.) The key ingredients for success are close at hand, including information, consultation and public participation. Information provided must be objective, complete, easy to find and understand, and relevant.

Townships’ efforts to inform, consult and engage citizens in policy-making cannot replace representative democracy and should not intend to do so. Instead, they complement and strengthen democracy as a whole.

A township’s increased attention to strengthening its relations with residents will be the result of a changed context for policy-making. The efforts will only be

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Engaging Citizens Through Technology



The Internet has opened up new frontiers in the exchange of information, but local governments have been slow to reap the benefits of

a network approach to good governance and are only now discovering the advantages of engaging citizens with this technology.

Today, there are widespread efforts to put more government information online and open up arenas for online consultation, including chat rooms and LISTSERV® lists. But, these efforts have their limits (not everyone is online for a start), so when it comes to feeding citizens’ suggestions into policy-making, the Internet on its own is not enough.

More than 200 progressive Michigan townships have discovered the advantages of having their own Web site. A Web site can increase participation by residents, inform citizens of current events, show off the community to outside visitors and promote the area’s assets to businesses looking for new locations. With an informative and attractive Web site, townships can engage the world in an online presentation of their community.

Watch for next month’s cover story on “e-government” for more information on using technology to benefit your township. ■

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effective if the entire board supports them. In practice, this requires each official to take an active interest in and provide visible support for these activities. The board needs to ensure that the input received from citizens is incorporated into decision-making.

Getting citizens to participate doesn't hinge solely on the tool used to engage them, however, added MTA Upper Peninsula Director at Large **Sarah Pelto**, supervisor of **Powell Township** (Marquette Co.). "It has more to do with connecting them to local government on an emotional level," she said. "If people are convinced that their input is being taken and real decisions are being made from it, then you start a process where they begin to engage."

The most important thing, however, is not to jump directly into action. To avoid problems later, determine the following:

- What do you want to achieve?
- How can you best achieve it?
- How will you be able to know if you were successful?

The respective roles and responsibilities of the township—making a decision for which it is held accountable and on which its performance is judged—and the citizen—providing input for the decision-making process—must also be clear. Citizens are not government; they elect it and want to be served by it. But if citizens are to participate more than simply via the ballot box, then they need proper access to information, meaningful consultation and opportunities to take an active part in policy-making.

"Township boards must recognize they can't do it all. Our job is to govern and guide our communities as a whole," Zoner noted. "We need our citizens to join us in problem-solving and strategic planning so we can use our limited resources more wisely in making the transition from reacting to the needs of our communities to anticipating them."

For successful actions, townships must plan and act strategically. The first phase—concept and planning—is an investment that will bear fruit at all stages. It entails clarifying the objectives your township wants to achieve, the public you want to address and the resources at your disposal.

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Tools for Increasing Citizen Involvement



Annual Reports—A written document that provides an overview of the entirety of a township's activities. Citizens can use these reports to judge if a government is delivering what it promised.



Board-Community Dialogs—An interactive meeting between the township board and residents where the board frames issues for, and receives feedback from, the participants.



Brochures—A pamphlet featuring overviews and summaries of township-related information in clear and easy-to-understand language, visual elements such as graphs and an attractive layout.



Charette—A meeting held within a specified time limit where participants work intensely together to reach a resolution. The township sets the goals and time limit—and announces both ahead of time. A leader's responsibility is to bring out all points of view from concerned residents and other participants.



Chat Room—A place or page on a Web site where residents can "chat" with each other by typing messages, which are displayed almost instantly on the screens of others who are in the "chat room."



Citizen Panels (Advisory Committees)—These panels are composed of a representative sample of citizens with the aim of ensuring broad representation and providing a forum for ongoing consultation.



Community Forums—A meeting where local residents express their views to decision-makers on priorities for the township and provide feedback on the performance of implementation strategies.



Consensus Conference—A group of 10 to 15 citizens randomly selected to question experts on a policy issue, after which they discuss the issue among themselves. At the end, they publicly present the conclusions they share.



Direct Mail—Delivery of written information directly to citizens' doorsteps. This is a very broad and relatively expensive tool to inform citizens.



E-News—Electronic newsletters published and distributed by the township to residents who subscribe by submitting their e-mail addresses.



Electronic Bulletin Board—An area of a Web site where users can post messages for other users to read and respond. In most cases, readers contact the author of a bulletin board message by e-mail.



Focus Groups—A gathering of a group of citizens in one place for a period of a day or less, who receive informa-

tion and are interviewed individually and together about their views and reactions.



Information Center—Designated space at the township that is accessible to citizens and provides information about township government programs and services.



LISTSERV® Lists—A popular automatic mailing list server sponsored by the township. Residents “subscribe” to a given discussion, and the “conversations” are distributed to the entire subscriber base via e-mail.



Media Relations—Building relationships with journalists to increase awareness and coverage of your township’s activities and services.



Newsletter—An effective way to convey important information to busy residents about township activities. Regardless of budget, newsletters can be as simple or complex as your township would like, as long as it reflects and speaks to the character of your community.



Office Hours—This tool offers citizens regular opportunities to meet and talk to township officials and personnel.



Open Houses—An event hosted by the township, for example at the township hall or fire station, to showcase township buildings and services.



Public Hearing—Public hearings are required in certain decision-making processes (budgets and special assessments, for example). Chaired by the township board or another appointed commission, they are open to all citizens who wish to attend.



Public Opinion Polls—Established instruments for portraying opinions held by a population on a given issue at a certain moment in time. To deliver statistically valid results, public opinion polls follow a strict methodology, involving random samples, trained interviewers and pre-tested questionnaires.



Suggestion Box—A container located in the township hall, which allows for the collection of suggestions and complaints.



Survey—A structured series of questions presented to citizens. The responses of a representative sample are collected and analyzed. Questions can be either closed (choice of several pre-defined answers) or open (answer freely).



Web site—A collection of “pages” or files linked together and available on the World Wide Web.



Welcome Packets—A small packet of information that describes the township and services provided to all new residents when they contact the township for water/sewer service, register to vote or file a property transfer.



Working with Youth—The promotion of local government is important to help develop a level of understanding and involvement by young residents in township government. Start a youth advisory council or hold a mock township election. ■

Setting Objectives

Objectives describe what you want to achieve. Objectives put focus on the important issues when planning, executing or evaluating, help identify which actions are needed, and justify actions. They also put these actions into a larger perspective.

When developing objectives:

- **Set objectives at all levels.** This puts activities in context and links to the broader goals of your township.
- **Be realistic.** Setting goals unrealistically high may lead to inflated expectations and to disappointment when they are not achieved.
- **Match objectives with resources and activities.**
- **Write objectives down.** This makes them explicit and provides the basis for evaluation.
- **Share.** Develop objectives together with key township personnel—and, at the very least, share them with staff so they know what they are working toward. Do the same, if possible, with residents.

Tools for Enhancing Public Participation

No single tool or approach will be suitable in every township and situation. Each township must take into consideration local traditions and practices. The amount of resources will limit the scope of tools available.

Public opinion polls, surveys, comments and notice periods are examples of popular tools used for seeking citizen feedback. Public hearings, as well as focus groups and seminars, are forms of government-citizen consultation.

Government’s task is to govern—to make policy. Information, consultation and active participation are not replacements for government taking initiatives or making decisions. Government has a leadership role, and citizens expect government to fulfill it—after all, that is why they vote officials into office.

The question, however, is less *whether* to lead and more about *how* to lead. Townships can practice leadership in two ways. They can either practice leadership ignorant of citizens’ direct concerns and input—which puts all governments into crises of lack of trust, or they may practice leadership open to citizen concerns and input.

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The latter gives officials the chance to tap into wider citizen resources, to develop better policies and to gain more trust and legitimacy. This informed, collaborative kind of leadership balances leading and listening.

Strengthening government-citizen relations is a means for townships to fulfill their leadership role more effectively. It is not, however, a magic wand. Simply pretending to take citizens' views and input into account is counterproductive, leading to less trust in township government and democracy. This is why, in all attempts to strengthen government-citizen relations, commitment and leadership are vital for success.

According to White, "As the problems local governments are asked to solve become more complex and economic times tighter, officials will need more input from their residents. When boards are facing the difficult decisions of budget cuts, they can't just work off their own perspective; their decision impacts their entire community. It's a partnership, and one can't move forward without the other."

Of course, strengthening government-citizen relations is not a guaranteed path to success. The process may generate opposition, or impose significant delays on policy-making, making it costly for townships. Such risks should, however, be weighed against the negative effects and costs of *not* engaging citizens.

One thing is clear: this process requires resources—time,

expertise and funding—like any other township activity. However, the funds needed to achieve significant results are usually small in comparison to the total amount spent on a given policy. Are the resources well spent? If the effects of strengthening government-citizen relations—such as the chances for better implementation, better policies, voluntary compliance and more trust in township government—are valuable, then the funds are well spent.

But how can your township strengthen this relationship? Producing newsletters is not enough. What happens to these tools? What information do they carry? Do they reach the intended residents, or do they get tossed in the wastebasket?

To be successful, townships must plan information, consultation and active participation activities. It is about setting goals, planning and implementing activities to reach them, and evaluating whether they were achieved.

Pelto noted that township boards must recognize the barrier to participation created by residents' busy lives. "Most people would love to be more involved with activities in their local communities, but with the time constraints they face with work and family, it's difficult for most of them to find the time to volunteer," she observed. "Creating specific projects where they can be of assistance, such as a park clean-up or a recycling day, where they can make a difference and possibly get their whole family involved creates a win-win situation for them and the township."

Timing is Critical

Stronger government-citizen relations need time to be built and to show results. There is no quick fix. It is unrealistic to think that citizens are suddenly going to show greater trust in the township board just because it has just started to engage them in a single policy initiative. Citizens need time to contribute to policy-making by becoming familiar with the issues and developing their own proposals.

Direct effects of citizen engagement depend on when the citizens become involved. If it is at a later stage in the policy cycle—close to or even after decision-making—then citizens have little real impact on policy-making. Instead, involve citizens during the preparatory and explorative stages of the policy cycle to achieve greater effects.

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Use Creativity During the Process

There is no ready-made solution to the challenges your township is facing. Each township needs to creatively develop activities in the context of its specific situation and challenges.

It would be easy to simply set objectives and choose tools once and be done with it. However, this is not practical since relations between township boards and citizens are dynamic. The context for this relationship changes over time—as do issues, options for policy-making, and affected citizens.

Be Prepared for Criticism

Criticism and debate are part of democracy. Engaging citizens in policy-making rarely results in a standing ovation for any unit of government. If citizens have rarely been given a chance to be heard, they might use their first opportunity to do so by airing their anger or frustration. Or they might simply choose to not follow the options proposed by the township board.

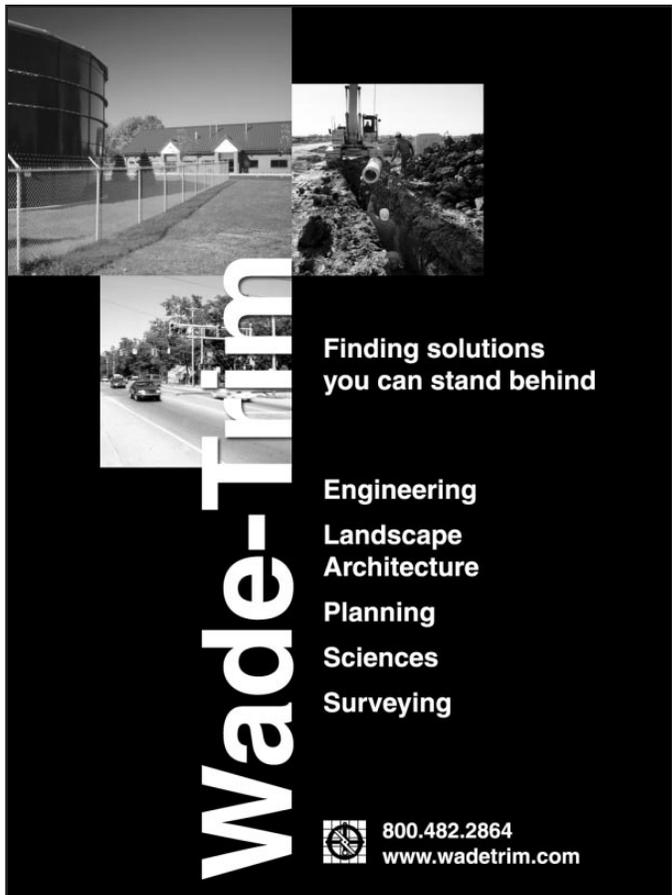
Remember: If you invite citizens to say what they think, don't be surprised if they end up doing exactly that. And don't be alarmed to find that their ideas might not fit with your own. After all, the goal is to get input from citizens—not a round of applause.

An Ounce of Prevention ...

In the government-citizen partnership, understanding, trusting and appreciating each other's roles are a prerequisite for engagement. Many townships new to these concepts will require some time getting prepared for the process. Keep in mind that prevention is better than coming up with a cure. Be proactive and seize existing opportunities to creating an active constituency.

For boards with little previous experience with the tools presented in this article, it may be more productive to start slowly and not try to do everything at once. Township boards and citizens alike need time to get used to active participation, but there is no reason to wait any longer.

Take advantage of this opportunity to improve the quality of services your township provides to citizens, and to reduce costs and create sound policies that will ultimately build Michigan's future. ■



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