

Engaging Your Community to Support Sustainability (and Defeat the Unsustainable)

Source: Presentation by Patricia Ross, Jason Thorne and Karen Nasmith
FCM 2015 Sustainable Communities Conference
Shared with Permission

Here is a summary of key ideas and strategies that municipalities can use to successfully engage community members to either:

- 1) Advance initiatives that support positive change or
- 2) Halt those that can negatively impact quality of life.

1. Speak from personal experiences: Use stories to engage and challenge your audience. We can't emphasize enough how persuasive and effective this can be. Stories are what captivate the listener and stick in their mind long after the presentation.

2. Address complex and seemingly overwhelming challenges with invitations to meaningful and measurable collective action: Individuals are more likely to act if they feel others are joining in responding as a neighborhood (or community) where the collective action will have a greater impact. Tactics and considerations include:

- a. Just ask.** You would be surprised how many want to join you but need that personal invitation.
- b. Consider adapting successful business models** like Runners Room or Weight Watchers where individuals work with a buddy within a larger community of support and have frequent check ins. Work with neighborhoods or 'communities of interest' (e.g. faith based organizations)
- c. Find a well-respected champion "with a twist."** See if you can get a champion that might surprise people. If it is an environmental issue, engage the President of the Chamber of Commerce or someone

from the mining sector who can bring credibility and valuable insight on a complex issue.

d. Ensure that champions and community leaders are supported and have access to resources and technical guidance or expertise.

3. Get beyond the usual suspects and early adopters. For controversial issues (e.g. climate change, social housing) engage people by focusing on the end result. Tactics and considerations include:

a. Understand the needs of the target audience then determine ways to achieve the end result by addressing the needs of the audience. Not everyone will agree on climate change, but everyone is interested in saving money on energy bills.

b. Science and studies are important, but common sense arguments are most compelling. The combination of both is powerful. Don't get too bogged down in details. Find your "bottom line" argument and start there. Have a back-up paper with scientific sources, websites and studies that prove your position to leave with people.

4. Address burnout by celebrating progress. Who wants to keep working on an issue when they aren't clear if any progress is being made? This can apply to groups that engage with a wide range of issues, including Secondary Plans, Solid Waste Master Plans, or community action days.

a. Communicate achievements and celebrate milestones. Individuals need to know their actions are having an impact. Every effort small or large should be appreciated.

b. Recognize champions. Leverage opportunities to profile internal and external champions (e.g. website, blog, newsletter or email list communication).

5. Make it easy. Other people are daunted by the task and don't know where to start. Give specifics of small and large tasks they could take on, explain how they can do it and express your appreciation for any effort no matter how small. Give names and addresses of people in power they want to influence, suggest points they might want to address. You can

also use websites such as www.change.org and www.leadnow.ca to create petitions and draft letter templates to send to decision makers.

- 6. Attitude is everything!** Be positive and keep your discouraged thoughts to yourself. People want to be part of a positive movement with hope that shows respect for them and others. Don't be afraid to show passion-it's contagious.
- 7. Research, Research, Research!** Knowledge is powerful: be evidence based. There is no substitute for hard work and it is essential that you have the studies to back up your position not only to convince others, but to feel comfortable yourself. Ask questions, challenge theories, ask what you are not being told, intentionally seek out both sides of an argument (the pros and the cons). There is nothing that inspires confidence like the demonstration of knowledge that supports the conviction that you are right.
- 8. Use repetitive messaging that connects to a range of stakeholders.** Generally speaking, people need to hear a message many times before they are compelled to act. Messaging should include economic, environmental and social (particularly health related) implications-leave no excuse not to care. People need to feel personally connected and affected.
- 9. Work with the media.** Respect them, understand their deadlines and establish trust. Don't dodge the difficult questions. Prepare well for interviews and be careful with your words, but candid and forthright. Have someone commit to being the media contact, willing to be available at all times, day or night, vacation or not.
- 10. Form a multi stakeholder group with a "swords down" policy where everyone agrees to set aside talk of differences and works towards a common goal.** You will get to know each other as people, not issues and that will form a bond that shows a united strength that will also influence others. If there are arguments, don't air that dirty laundry publically.

- 11. Focus on the “why”.** Focus engagement on a discussion of why the initiative was important to support (or not to support).
- 12. Be creative.** Don't just rely on large, formal consultations and public meetings. Meet people in small, informal groups. Host living room socials and kitchen table conversations.
- 13. Visualize the end result:** Show people what it will look like and what impact it will have. A picture is worth a thousand words. This saves time and acts as a common language.

For more information contact:

- **Patricia Ross, Deputy Mayor, City of Abbotsford and Vice-chair Fraser Valley Regional District, BC Email: PRoss@abbotsford.ca**
- **Jason Thorne, General Manager, Planning and Economic Development, City of Hamilton, ON Email: Jason.Thorne@hamiltion.ca**
- **Karen Nasmith, Director, Co-Founder and Director/Executive Director, Project Neutral/eMERGE Guelph, ON Email: karen@projectneutral.org**