



Massachusetts Municipal Association

MMA BEST PRACTICES SERIES

Recommendations for Effective Local Government Administration and Management from MMA Policy Committees

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MMA Policy Committee on Municipal and Regional Administration Best Practice Recommendation: Strategies for Boosting Community Engagement

BEST PRACTICE: Implement key public engagement strategies to facilitate and expand citizen participation and increase the viewpoints contributed in the local dialogue and decision-making process.

There is no one-size fits all approach when it comes to community engagement. In order to maintain a healthy governance structure, residents must be aware of quality-of-life decisions in their communities and feel empowered to participate in the deliberative process. Empowerment comes through information sharing and access to decision makers. A range of activities are necessary to reach, engage and motivate diverse stakeholders to participate. "Diverse" should mean all demographics, including age, race, ethnicity, religion, disability status, sexual orientation, gender identity, property ownership (or not), language, income and educational attainment.

The following are considered best practices in this area:

- Make a stakeholder list for your community.
- Create user personas to define the different stakeholders in your community, and use these user personas to help predict and prepare for attendance and participation in meetings.
- Identify and consult with community-based and intermediary organizations, including neighborhood and grassroots leadership groups, local clergy and faith-based organizations, community and ethnic media, and others that can provide conduits for two-way communication between local officials and community residents on specific issues and policies.
- Provide early notice for public hearings and meetings, with details explaining the purposes and objectives and the subjects to be covered. Provide time and location details, as well as guidelines for participation.

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- Use multiple methods for community engagement and keeping the public informed. These can include face-to-face forums, focus groups or community-wide meetings, farmer's markets or community festivals, as well as social media and online surveys or third-party engagement platforms that allow real-time answers and resources such as maps. [Consult your municipal counsel on the open meeting and public records laws before you start to engage on social media platforms.]
- Hold "office hours," when community members can come in and speak with municipal officials and build relationships.
- Use local realtor listings to reach out to new homeowners. Hold new homeowner meetings with key local officials to help build new relationships.
- Understand the barriers that could prevent some residents from attending meetings, such as location, child care needs, language and holiday observances. Are meetings held in locations that are difficult to reach using public transportation? Is the setting one that people do not often go to or might not be comfortable going to, such as city hall or municipal offices? Try changing the location to a school, public hall, restaurant, or a space where people naturally congregate. Make certain these alternative locations are fully accessible. If meetings are held in a restaurant or other location that serves food or drink, make sure there is an understanding that they do not need to purchase anything to participate. Choose times that are convenient for all who may participate. Consider multiple meetings at different sites, times of day, and days of the week, perhaps co-sponsored by community groups as a way to increase attendance.
- Set and enforce ground rules for a civil, reasoned discussion focused on legitimate, substantive concerns and solutions to community problems.
- Create participant worksheets that allow meeting attendees to offer more detailed, individual comments and ideas.
- Make sure that appointments to local boards represent the demographics of the community, including a representative percentage of the rental community.

Resources:

- Metropolitan Area Planning Council Community Engagement Guide: tinyurl.com/MAPEngage
- "Running Effective Public Meetings," from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership: tinyurl.com/RunMeetings
- "Improve Public Engagement in Municipal Government," by Sustainable Jersey: tinyurl.com/SustainableJersey
- "Beyond the Usuals: Ideas to Encourage Broader Public Engagement in Community Decision Making," by the Institute for Local Government: tinyurl.com/InstituteLocal