

Getting the Community Involved in Local Development Efforts

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Community involvement is fundamental to the success of any development plan. Residents are more likely to embrace development proposals when invited to contribute their opinions and shape efforts to meet their needs. By using local knowledge networks to create and implement development plans, you can enhance community cohesion and vitality. Furthermore, involved community members will likely be more willing to devote the time needed to implement the proposals. When community members feel invested in the place that they live, the chances a plan will succeed are greatly improved.

Diverse involvement

Buy-in is integral to successful community development work. However, that buy-in must represent the area's diversity. Optimally, this involvement will reflect the community in terms of race and ethnicity, gender, age, ability, and religious affiliation. If the community effort involves economic and business development, then diverse industry representation is also important.

How to achieve diverse representation can differ across regions, however, it is essential to be actively inclusive. For some areas, efforts may include reaching out to ethnic chambers of commerce or historically underserved colleges and universities.

For other areas, it may include reaching out to local churches, mosques, or even bowling alleys. Each community and development effort is different and requires individual approaches and participant lists. Local business leaders are essential to business and economic development—they may be less necessary for other types of development.

Location and time matter

It is important to select meeting places that are central and accessible. The location should be non-threatening. For example, city or town halls and courthouses might be intimidating; while schools, libraries, Extension offices, and community centers may be more inviting.

When you meet also matters if you want to maximize convenience for the target audience. Sometimes a breakfast or lunch meeting is best, but if an evening meeting is preferred, be sure to



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factor in child care and travel time. Because no particular time is always best, polling key individuals and organizational representatives may be a good place to start.

Whom to invite

- Industry and financial leaders
- Representatives of faith-based organizations
- Entrepreneurs and small business leaders
- County Extension Service personnel
- State and federal congressional representatives or staff
- Representatives from local and regional governments
- Owners of minority- and women-owned businesses
- Chambers of Commerce
- Ethnic Chambers of Commerce
- Economic development and tourism organizations
- Workforce development board representatives
- Educational leaders and organizations
- Nonprofit, voluntary, and civic-minded organizations
- Community foundations
- Rural cooperatives

Advertise

People will not get involved in an effort unless they know what it is and why they should care. People are often motivated by issues that affect them personally; however, contentious issues can take on a life of their own. To avoid antagonism, you should emphasize that attendees will discuss “positive solutions” to a problem or “opportunities” related to a local concern. In some cases, it may help to announce a speaker who will provide information and/or take questions about an important topic. Participants need to know if of the meeting is strictly informational (e.g., listen to a speaker) or if they will be taking part in a discussion. Advertisements should always include the meeting’s purpose, location, date, time, and duration, as well as where to find additional information.



In the past, getting the word out meant putting an advertisement in the local newspaper. Although this remains an important way to reach many local communities, declining readership and the emergence of alternative media are two reasons you should consider additional strategies. Newspaper readership among younger age groups has diminished in part because they are less likely to subscribe to newspapers. Though newspaper advertisements generate attention, as do reporters’ stories or letters to the editor, relying on newspapers alone risks narrowing your audience by missing younger readers or others that rely on alternative media sources.

As noted above, involvement across all dimensions of the community is key to the success of any economic or planning effort. Remember that many radio and television stations offer free community service announcements, and may even be interested in stories about events of interest to a broad audience.

Given that young people are less likely to subscribe to local newspapers or watch local television stations, reaching them may require online media. These include social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, email lists, local discussion forums and message boards, as well as community or agency blogs. Though online media may involve some labor cost to set up, they are an excellent (often free) tool for reaching the local community—especially members who are younger

and potentially more difficult to get involved. If your community or agency lacks these online tools, adopting them may be one of the first steps in your development planning.

Keep in mind that different platforms attract different audiences. LinkedIn reaches professionals while Facebook tends to reach older audiences. Twitter and Instagram often appeal to younger demographics. Existing email lists can also provide a direct connection to potential participants.

In addition to newspapers and social media, you can advertise in places where people gather to socialize. For example, flyers can be posted on community bulletin boards at libraries, in downtowns, etc. Schools, churches, and civic organizations may be willing to put an advertisement in bulletins or newsletters or let you set up an information table.

Face-to-face invitations can be crucial to securing participation. Asking someone to participate in an event lets them know you value them and really want their opinion. Invitations made in person are more time consuming, but are always more effective than those made through electronic media.

Traditional media, social media, signage, and face-to-face invitations all interact to strengthen community participation by reaching different audiences and reinforcing messages across time and place. Though we provide some templates below, communities may need to fine tune their approach to suit their local needs. For example, a community with a significant immigrant or refugee population,

may need to develop advertisement materials in the relevant language to reach that population. Again, one of the most important approaches to increasing involvement is to advertise.

During the meetings

Advertisements can get people to attend their first meeting, but the quality of the meeting determines whether they will remain engaged. It is imperative that meetings be efficient and focused on the stated purpose.

Recording the names and contact information of attendees helps organizers see who participated in the discussion as well as who was missing. Equally important, contact information allows organizers to communicate future efforts directly with participants. Leaders can pass a sign-in sheet around during the meeting or a committee member can ask people to sign in as they enter.

It is important to move quickly to the meeting's purpose—avoid long introductions. Whether attendees are asked to introduce themselves depends on the size of the group and the meeting's purpose. It may be preferable to have people introduce themselves to small groups. Presenters and participants like to know who is in the room and introductions can help people be more comfortable speaking to the group later.

A method known as “appreciative inquiry” involves asking questions that encourage participants to dig deeper into their beliefs and the complexities of local issues. This method is an effective way to elicit feedback from participants. Discussing questions in this way can help participants better understand different perspectives and identify possible solutions or actions. The value of this approach is that it ensures everyone has the opportunity to be heard.

Near the meeting's stated end time, an organizer or facilitator should ask participants for take-away messages or suggestions. You can do this broadly or through reporting out of small group discussions. The facilitators can then summarize these points relative to the meeting's purpose, point out the progress made, and outline opportunities for future discussion. In smaller groups, this may be a good



time to set the next meeting. Allow enough time for reporting out and summarizing, but remember that getting people out on time shows you respect their time and other commitments.

Keep participants engaged between meetings

After the meeting, send an email thanking participants, summarizing the discussion, and listing follow-up steps as well as the next meeting time. It is helpful to post this message on social media to capture additional attention. If there was no media coverage, you might send the summary email to local news outlets.

As you address follow-up steps, post updates on social media. For example, if you discussed

the need to clean up the downtown at a meeting, advertise a community clean-up day and then post photos of people engaged in the activity. Finally, announce progress and the next meeting date via social media to capitalize on momentum. Following the strategies outlined above before, during, and between meetings can help you succeed in getting your community involved in local development efforts.

Some of this material draws from the United States Department of Agriculture Stronger Economies Together Phase VI coaches' manual. We are grateful to these authors, the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, and the Southern Rural Development Center for their support of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service's adaptation presented here.

Social Media and Press Release Checklist

1. Day, date, time, location
2. Steps to accomplish during the meeting
3. What input you have had so far.
4. How future input will guide the efforts.
5. Whether you will serve a meal.

Press Release

[Date]

[Organization] Hosts Community Development Workshop

Contact: [name, phone number, email]

[Town name] – [County/community name] residents will meet [date] to [purpose, for example, identify local assets and discuss ways to leverage those assets to create new capital]. [Organization] will host a community development forum for county residents at [time] at [location].

Example description paragraph: Asset-based community development (ABCD) is based on the idea that every community member contributes skills, talents, and connections. Assets include more than just money and infrastructure. Education and skills of residents, social connections, cultural heritage and traditions, politics, and environmental assets are equally important.

[Optional quote from organizer or facilitator about reason for meeting or importance of broad participation.]

Participants will [what participants will do, for example, hear a speaker on ____, get their questions answered, have a discussion about ____]. [Sentence about intended outcome.] Participants of all ages and interests are welcome. Contact [name and contact info] to learn more or register.

Newsletter/bulletin/email paragraph

[Organization] will host a community development forum for county residents at [time], [date] at [location]. Participants will [what participants will do, for example, hear a speaker on _____, get their questions answered, have a discussion about _____]. [Sentence about intended outcome.] Participants of all ages and interests are welcome. [Name and contact info] may be contacted to learn more or register.

Facebook-type Social Media Post

Photo

[County/community name] residents, come discuss/learn about [topic]! Community forum at [time], [date] at [location]. Contact [Name] at [contact info] for more information. [Imbed link to website with more info if available.]

Twitter-type Social Media Post

Photo

Come discuss [topic], [time], [date] at [location]! [Imbed link to website with more info if available.] [Tag relevant hashtags and twitter users].

Note: Social media posts with photos get more attention!

Example Press Release

January 10, 2020

AgriLife Extension Hosts Community Assets Workshop

Contact: Dr. Rebekka Dudensing, 979-845-1719, rmdudensing@tamu.edu

WHEELER – Wheeler County residents will meet Thursday, January 28, to identify local assets and discuss ways to leverage those assets to create new capital. AgriLife Extension will host a community forum for county residents at 11:00 at the Stanton city library.

“Focusing on the positive may seem like a cliché, but asset-based community development helps towns, counties, and multi-county regions to build upon existing assets to create new social and economic opportunities,” said Dr. Rebekka Dudensing, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension economist, College Station.

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is based on the idea that every community member contributes skills, talents, and connections.

“Community development precedes economic development. We need to create communities where people want to live and work and raise families. Through ABCD, community members build that culture together,” Dudensing explained.

Assets include more than just money and infrastructure. Education and skills of residents, social connections, cultural heritage and traditions, politics, and environmental assets are equally important.

“Communities are often concerned that they lack money and sufficient infrastructure, but other types of capital are equally or even more important,” Dudensing said. “And those are the things rural communities are really rich in and can leverage—great people, cultures, and environments. They are often overlooked, but we can inventory and create linkages between these assets that help create even stronger communities.”

Forum participants will identify and link Wheeler County assets through a fun, interactive process facilitated by Dr. Dudensing. They will discuss opportunities to link and leverage these assets in new ways. Participants of all ages and interests are welcome. Contact Rebekka Dudensing at 979-845-1719 to learn more or register.

Newsletter/bulletin/email paragraph

AgriLife Extension will host a community development forum for Wheeler County residents at 11:00, Thursday, January 28, at the Stanton city library. Participants will identify local assets through a fun, interactive process facilitated by Dr. Rebekka Dudensing. They will discuss opportunities to leverage these assets to create new capital. Participants of all ages and interests are welcome. Contact Rebekka Dudensing at 979-845-1719 to learn more or register.

Facebook-type Social Media Post

Wheeler County residents, help us identify local assets we can use to strengthen our community! Community forum at 11:00, Thursday, January 28, at the Stanton city library. Contact Rebekka Dudensing at 979-845-1719 for more information or visit www.communities.tamu.edu.

Twitter-type Social Media Post

Come discuss community assets at 11:00, Thursday, 1/28 at the city library!
www.communities.tamu.edu @agrilifeext @communitydevelopment

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

AgriLifeExtension.tamu.edu

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