

## SUSTAINING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN YOUR TOWN

Community Heart & Soul® fosters meaningful, productive public engagement. Through Heart & Soul, your town developed civic muscle that can be used to convene and engage the community around important issues and topics.

***Sustaining Public Engagement in Your Town*** offers strategies to ensure that authentic and inclusive public engagement is the norm and pattern for public institutions and community life in your town.

### **What is Engagement?**

One of the challenges most communities face is how to define and clarify engagement. When you use the word “engagement,” some people think of obligatory public meetings while others assume you are talking about voting. A more inclusive way to define engagement is to say that it is: the activities by which people’s concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues.

This definition of engagement comes from *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* by Matt Leighninger and Tina Nabatchi. The Orton Family Foundation would like to thank and acknowledge Matt Leighninger for his contributions to this examination of successful public engagement in Community Heart & Soul communities.

### **Engagement the Heart & Soul Way**

Heart & Soul primes local residents for engagement in active, creative, and participatory forums for community building. It increases the capacity of people—including town staff, local organizations, and civic-minded residents—to facilitate discussions, organize events, recruit participants, frame issues, moderate online forums, and conduct research.

In Community Heart & Soul, participants are involved in ways that validate their own history and stake in the community; foster civil discussion with people they may have disagreed with; help them learn about key public issues and decisions; and allow them to contribute to public decision-making and problem-solving.

As you move to Phase 4, consider how your efforts to improve engagement and discourse will be sustained. The community will likely have new expectations for how engagement happens, and they are more likely to demand and participate in similar activities going forward, rather than standard public meetings. Sustaining engagement is really about continuing to use the principles and practices of Heart & Soul.

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### Strategies for Sustaining Engagement

As your Heart & Soul Team members develops a Stewardship Plan, they should consider the following strategies that have been implemented in Heart & Soul communities and discuss which, if any, activities could be adapted and adopted to fit your community's vision and goals for engagement.

#### Inventory Civic Assets

Inventorying civic assets is one way to identify existing opportunities for public engagement. It can be beneficial to assemble a centralized directory or interactive map of services and volunteer opportunities. The creation of an inventory invites contributions and edits from residents, and therefore is an effective form of public engagement.

*Example: When community members in Golden, Colorado came together for Heart & Soul conversations, they discovered the value of building relationships across sectors and disciplines. A unique partnership emerged between the city and local churches, and they created Golden Cares C3. The purpose of this web-based resource is to facilitate interaction and build partnerships that will strengthen the community and provide information that encourages participation in, and support of, a wide variety of community efforts. You can visit the Golden Cares C3 website at <http://www.goldencares3c.org/>*

#### Assess Existing Public Engagement Activities

In most communities, there are already some examples of productive engagement. They include dynamic neighborhood associations, vibrant local online forums, recurring social events, or successful youth leadership programs.

You can assess existing public engagement activities by asking:

- 1) What engagement methods and opportunities do we have?
- 2) What goals do existing activities serve?
- 3) What opportunities are there for improvement?
- 4) What engagement opportunities are missing and need to be added?

*Example: One of Essex, Vermont's Heart & Soul Statements focused on the importance of community connections, including public participation. After Phase 4, a public workshop was organized to help develop strategies for improving public engagement. The workshop included a timeline of engagement efforts in Essex since 1990. Participants added missing events and talked about which ones worked (and could be built upon) and which were problematic.*

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★ ESSEX ENGAGEMENT over the years ...

1990's	2000 →	2005 →	2010 →	2015 →	2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CHIPS Breakfast Meetings</li> <li>OTHERS?</li> </ul>	<p>2001:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facing Future with Compassion + courage</li> <li>Community forum on 6 month anniversary of 9/11</li> <li>Attended by 120 people</li> <li>OUTCOMES + SPIN-OFFS: ANNUAL BLOCK PARTY</li> </ul> <p>2004:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bullying Forum</li> <li>Attended by 300 people</li> <li>OUTCOMES + SPIN-OFFS: Many legislators were there inspired to support passage of state-wide anti-bullying + harassment legislation</li> <li>ANTI-HARASSMENT LEGISLATION</li> </ul>	<p>FORUMS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>re Grocery Store in EJ village</li> <li>Attended by 100 people</li> <li>OUTCOMES + SPIN-OFFS: MA'S MARKET</li> </ul> <p>2010:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two Community Forums for Downtown Revitalization (ALL ADDED FOR DOWNTOWN EJ)</li> <li>Attended by over 100 people</li> <li>OUTCOMES + SPIN-OFFS: FIVE CORNERS PARKER'S MARKET</li> <li>BR AVENUE RECESS</li> <li>VILLAGE PLANTERS</li> <li>Applied for ORTON H's grant</li> <li>TRAIN HSP</li> </ul>	<p>2010</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Calendar 2.0 Forum</li> <li>Attended by over 200 people</li> <li>OUTCOMES + SPIN-OFFS: CALENDAR 2.0 SHELVED DUE TO COMMUNITY OPPOSITION</li> </ul> <p>2013</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Heart + Soul of Essex</li> <li>2 year process that engaged 1,000 people</li> <li>FORUMS + LIVING ROOM CONVERSATIONS + SHERVEY + COMMUNITY ART PROJECT + TENIA + PAPER BIRTH + VIDEOS + POP UP SHOPS +</li> <li>OUTCOMES + SPIN-OFFS: ESSEX GOVERNANCE GROUP</li> <li>ESSEX GIVES OUT</li> <li>THOUGHTFUL GROWTH IN ACTION</li> <li>DESIGN 5 CORNERS</li> <li>ON-LINE CASINOS</li> <li>CE-WEEDING SPACE AT E2</li> <li>NUBAND OFFICE</li> </ul>	<p>2015</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design Five Corners</li> <li>engaged over 300 people</li> <li>Survey + Workshop</li> <li>OUTCOMES + SPIN-OFFS: Raised awareness about opportunities for redevelopment of downtown, zoning ordinances, CHANGE IN ZONING LAW THAT LIMITS THE HEIGHT OF BUILDINGS IN EJ.</li> <li>Essex Belltower</li> <li>Citizen led initiative to create a paper that shares both progressive + conservative views about upcoming ballot issues</li> </ul> <p>2015-2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RED Study Committee (re school unification)</li> <li>Survey 750</li> <li>SIX COMMUNITY FORUMS</li> <li>ATTENDED BY MORE THAN 100 PEOPLE</li> <li>OUTCOMES + SPIN-OFFS: COMMUNITIES ALL VOTE YES ON SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION TO FORM ENWSB</li> <li>THOUGHTFUL GROWTH IN ACTION</li> </ul>	<p>2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ESSEX COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTER</li> <li>Forums on SAFETY, SEX OFFENDER release</li> <li>ENGAGED OVER 120 people</li> <li>Recreation Governance Study Committee</li> <li>Surveys 350</li> <li>Forums 0-20 people at 5 forums each</li> <li>Engaged 450 people</li> <li>Public Engagement Workshop!</li> </ul> <p>ENGAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE / RESOURCES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CHIPS</li> <li>H+S of Essex</li> <li>ESSEX CIC</li> <li>ENWSB Nellie Mae School / Community engagement initiative</li> <li>Municipal Support</li> <li>ESX Departments</li> <li>ESSEX COMMUNITIES</li> <li>ESSEX FEE + BROWNELL LIBRARIES</li> </ul>

### Establish a Citizens' Academy

A Citizens' Academy is an ongoing program to inform citizens about municipal programs and processes and engage residents in contributing to the community. Citizens' academies provide many benefits, including boosting the capacity of community members related to engagement and serving as a recruitment tool for local boards and commissions.

*Example: Golden, Colorado's Public Works Department began offering an academy with hands-on training activities, tours of City facilities, and presentations by Public Works staff. This popular offering increased engagement with municipal staff and helped inform citizens about the important role of the Public Works Department. More at:*

<http://www.cityofgolden.net/government/departments-divisions/public-works/public-works-citizens-academy/>

### Adopt a Resolution

Resolutions allow public bodies to uphold the community's Heart & Soul Statements and declare their commitment to public participation. These kinds of declarations help town councils, selectboards, school boards, planning commissions, and other official entities show that they value the roles that residents can play in public life. In most cases, these are non-binding statements. However, if they are accompanied by some other measures on this list, resolutions can be effective for showing that elected officials value productive contributions by citizens to local governance.

*Example: A resolution adopted by Golden, Colorado is included in the Phase 4 workbook.*

### Update Job Descriptions to Include Public Engagement

Many communities have people working in local governments whose role in public engagement is ill-defined or whose skills in conducting public engagement are

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underdeveloped. Oftentimes, staff are unaware of the kinds of ideas and processes described in this document. Job descriptions that describe the skills necessary to organize and support engagement, and that establish performance benchmarks to be used in professional development and promotion, can be beneficial.

*Example: When the City of Cortez, Colorado needed to fill a position in its planning department, city staff ensured the job description clearly articulated a responsibility for upholding Heart & Soul.*

### **Strengthen Community Groups Through Skill Building and Training Programs**

Neighborhood, business, homeowners', and Parent-Teacher Association groups have great potential to contribute to day-to-day engagement activities in a community. However, these groups face several difficulties that can limit their ability to effectively impact schools and neighborhoods. First, and perhaps most importantly, they tend to follow conventional engagement formats. Second, recruitment efforts are often minimal, which means the usual suspects turn out again and again, and meetings can lack diversity and critical mass. Participants are seldom provided with opportunities to share information and stories, let alone make choices or take action.

These groups can be revitalized in several ways:

- 1) Training programs that provide recruitment, facilitation, and organizational skills to neighborhood leaders
- 2) How-to materials that reinforce the listed skills above
- 3) Policies that delineate the role(s) of these groups in policymaking—on what kinds of issues and decisions will the association be asked to advise the school board, town council, and other elected and appointed officials? What will the process be for those interactions?
- 4) New meeting formats that are more social, child-friendly, accessible, and fun

*Example: Cortez Heart & Soul organized a series of youth/adult partnership events with the School Community Youth Collaborative and the OMNI Institute. The events offered chances for youth to learn skills for serving on committees and to mingle with local civic leaders. The training wasn't just for kids, though. Adult participants learned best practices for actively involving youth on leadership teams. As a result, Cortez's City Council created two permanent seats with equal voting rights for teens on the city's Parks and Recreation Advisory Board.*