



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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Tackling the Challenge of Rural Community Engagement

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“The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: No one is against it in principle because it is good for you,” said community engagement expert Sherry Arnstein.¹ While you may agree on its usefulness and value, in practice, engaging the community in transit improvement can be a bit hard to swallow. Not every citizen has a positive view of public engagement, or wants to engage in giving feedback. Every year there seem to be new checklists, technology and studies on how to best engage the public; all of which have value but can be perhaps overwhelming. To help you narrow down the options for engaging your citizens, this article will highlight the key challenges in rural community engagement. Once you know what challenges to be mindful of, you can focus on developing a community outreach effort that makes sense for your area.

Common challenges in rural community engagement

Distance and barriers. Community engagement in rural areas can be a challenge because of the sheer

space that many communities occupy. More and more rural transit agencies are working on a regional level, connecting several communities. This affects not only their operational logistics but also relationships with a wider public. Agencies looking to cover a region can struggle to unite people across city and county borders. Even within the same locale, engaging both the farming/rural residents and in-town dwellers can be a challenge. Finding meeting times and locations that satisfy a good cross-section of the public can be difficult because of the wide variety of lifestyles in rural areas.

New voices vs. (same) old voices. In some rural areas, residents without long-time roots can find it difficult to plug into the community, especially if they work outside the community. On the flip side, long-time residents can become jaded in their participation, especially if they are typically the only people who participate or if their expectations are not often met. The history of public participation in your area is key to understanding how to engage these different voices in your outreach efforts. Knowing the most active members and also the absent parties will help you tailor your efforts to reach the maximum numbers of people.

Politics. Political will can work against your efforts, especially if elected officials do not value community input. Even those officials who support your community engagement efforts may be looking to only include their constituents, and in some places that can mean that minority populations can be left out of the process if you are not intentional about their inclusion.

Mistrust and expectations. The public can grow to mistrust local government and agencies because of past failed community engagement efforts or failed expectations. Citizens can become discouraged after volunteering their time to give feedback if they cannot

easily see the results. Violating expectations is a sure way to create and continue mistrust in your community.

How do you overcome these challenges? Here are some steps to consider:

Build relationships

Rural areas have an advantage in building relationships. In smaller towns or rural areas, the chance of your agency or the members of your agency having existing relationships with the public is higher than in urban areas because there are fewer people to reach. However, if your agency hasn't built relationships out there, it is crucial that you make this your first step to any deeper community engagement effort. Why? Because people are willing to travel farther and participate more for people they know, trust and like. It also helps you gain a deeper understanding of the individuals who make up your community, what motivates them and where their interests lie. Building strong relationships can help you address the challenges mentioned earlier.

A newsletter or email list does not count as a substitute for tangible relationships. Get in front of the people you want to engage, face to face. At the beginning of your next outreach program or initiative, identify 10 agencies or individuals who would be beneficial to the success of your project and invite each to an informal one-on-one meeting to grab a coffee and talk. Don't forget your local elected officials and city staff.

Tips for engaging people

Here are a few things to keep in mind to begin relationship building, from the University of Kansas Community Toolbox:

- Build relationships one at a time.
- Be genuine.
- Ask people questions and tell people about yourself; open up.
- Assume other people want to form relationships, too. It's easy to convince yourself that the public isn't interested in participating; don't shut yourself down before trying.
- Be persistent; trust takes time and so do relationships.
- Personally invite people to get involved. Many people are happy and eager to serve something larger than themselves.
- Enjoy people. If that goes against your nature, find someone within your agency who enjoys getting to know people.²

The idea behind building relationships is to open the door for dialogue, where people can be comfortable to agree or, more importantly, disagree and gain valuable input.

Educate and empower your public for action

The average citizen may know very little about the programs, initiatives and services your agency offers, so there is probably some amount of education that should go into your community engagement efforts. For some communities that could be as simple as publishing educational materials and distributing them. For others, you might consider creating a citizen academy.

A citizen academy is a useful tool in creating an engaged and educated public. For transit agencies, if you were interested in implementing a new fixed route service, you could form a citizen academy. The group would consist of the same people and meet each week for 7-8 weeks. During their meetings they would learn about the mechanics of a fixed route service and how that would impact the community. Activities allowing citizens to brainstorm, problem-solve and contribute can produce options your agency might not normally think about. Citizen academies can include city staff and elected officials as well as diverse members of the public; in fact it may be a great opportunity for people to interact who normally might not.³

Regardless of the technique you choose, include education in your community engagement efforts to create a more invested and knowledgeable public. This will help citizens understand the decisions made, as well as allow them to contribute valuable input.

Be clear, be concise, be trustworthy

Trust is crucial to public programs and initiatives. One way to secure the trust of the public is to set and manage expectations. For example, if you are interested in holding a public meeting ask yourself: What is our intent? Is a public meeting the best method, or would a workshop or survey work better? To help you identify your purpose, ask the following:

- Is the participation intended to generate ideas?
- Is it to identify attitudes?
- Is it to disseminate information?
- Is it to resolve some identified conflict?
- Is it to measure opinion?
- Is it to review a proposal?
- Or is it merely to serve as a safety valve for pent-up emotions?⁴

Explaining exactly what you expect from participants and what they can expect from you will go a long way in setting the ground work for the meeting. As a citizen, nothing is more disappointing than volunteering time to give advice on a new service and never have it considered because the intent was to simply update the public on the progress of a project already well under way.

Additional resources

For more information on different levels of public participation, see Sherry Arnstein's article, "Ladder of Participation," found at <http://www.participatorymethods.org/sites/participatorymethods.org/files/Arnstein%20ladder%201969.pdf>.

The KU Community Toolbox, <http://ctb.ku.edu/en>, has several modules on how to build relationships and on community engagement techniques.

For more information on other communities that are using citizen academies to create an informed and engaged public, visit the University of North Carolina's webpage and click on their database link: <https://www.sog.unc.edu/resources/microsites/citizens-academies>

Conclusion

Community engagement can be time-consuming and detailed, and it's tempting to skip it like you would the spinach on a plate. However, experience has proven that by engaging the public and building trusting relationships, initiatives and programs are ultimately more successful. It's also a process that will gain momentum. Once you lay the groundwork, your next initiative will be that much easier, as you will have already begun to form the necessary relationships and build rapport within the community. ●

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References

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