

Activity 3: Table discussion about the potential of a specific method of communication as a tool for civic engagement.

1. How can your table's method of communication be used to support community networks?
 2. What are the advantages and limitations of that tool?
 3. Develop clear steps for using this tool, defining roles and responsibilities for both community members and the City.
 4. What would it take to create a sustainable citywide system of community engagement using this tool?
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Project Website

Table 2:

1. One website with projects in subcategories
 - Easily search by subject – have a search engine at the top
 - Use comment boxes and comment threads
 - Polling
 - Make this a school project = engage youth
2. Limitation – people who don't have internet access; Need multiple languages
 - Advantage: 24 hour access
 - Everyone gets the same consistent info
 - Instant responses
 - Limitation and advantage: staff time to update in a timely manner
3. Rules of engagement for online = proper behavior
 - No anonymous comments = community members
 - City – update, monitor for appropriateness and provides facts and not opinions
 - Make it clear where we are in the process for each project
 - Have a calendar that shows important dates, i.e., meetings/forums
 - Have metrics- evaluation tools – feedback area on site
4. Evidence that it has helped to open up lines of communication
 - Community members know about it and are using it
 - City staff update and use consistently
 - Good example: Action Alexandria; Patch.com
 - Managed by communications department; get assistance from TC marketing class
 - Committee made up of city staff and community members who monitor

Table 7:

- Limitations: access to internet
- Make it searchable (city website)
- Inclusive, up to date, informative, not a marketing or sales pitch. Well organized easy to understand
- Provide opportunity to post comments AND BE RESPONDED TO
- Lay out the options
- Has to be staffed. Format should be consistent thru all departments, all schools
- Show how decision making occurs – how community input is incorporated
- Options should include surveys and results of survey data and how it is used
- Orient to citizen point of view
- Make it easy to navigate. City website is very difficult almost impossible to navigate. It's counter intuitive. You can't find anything unless you know the exact name and what it is. Full of jargon and too many acronyms. Only works if its user friendly and up to date. More staff resources.
- PROBLEM: no one identified as responsible or can't find who it is. Not enough resources.

Online forums

Table 1

- One Alexandria city app; alert when hear something interesting; potholes (see & report), lights out, flyer with meals on wheels, gamification two questions on website which are more important two things; call-click-connect to get through bureaucracy; 746-HELP!
- Time and effort considerations. We don't want to overwhelm staff
- Create wards w/community ambassadors
- Old fashioned petitions to prioritize issues
- Transparent place online to follow the process
- QR code for phones development pages, etc. (incorporate in training); standard operating procedure of city; tourists would love it at old town building
- Army of citizens to help process
- Geo fencing – registers when you are in the area of interest
- Advanced algorithms are better than online forums – they push info to the user instead of requiring user to seek out info on the online forums;
- Monitor Twitter and social networks for mentions of Alexandria and then volunteer teams or staff follow up
- Downside is that they are not event based
- Webinar first with Q&A that brings people to
- HR directors to bring to workers

Table 4:

- Quickly disseminates information to members of the online forum, and allows for discussion
- Advantages: Allows members of the community to participate from their homes instead of having to gather in one space and at any time of day, yet be able to participate.
 - Limitations: Who has access? Accountability and ownership over what is posted and said. Are all members of the community able/willing to use the online forum. Need a way to keep conversation civil/constructive. Language/translations
- Free internet access to everyone in the city (sponsored by city government)
 - Determine different purposes for the forum and create effective ways to collect and disseminate information. May need multiple forums. Create effective search tools. Consistent implementation. Support development of Wikis for different projects, with editors with balanced points of view.
- Need a facilitator who can monitor the discussions and postings immediately. Timely responses to postings. User friendly format and create an easy way to find on the city website.
- Training provided for all users/neighborhood ambassadors
- Provide internet access to community members, and/or extend library hours.

Table 8:

- Keeping dialogue constructive and from devolving
- Regulation and monitoring is valid and important to ensure respectful exchange
- Ensure balance
- City staff role – not dominate
- Redundancy – social media and online forums don't obviate 'traditional' communication
- Anyone should be able to start a thread and comment (?)
- Pros and cons of city being in charge
- Emotion can have a place
- Productive
- City-created community engagement WNA App (smartphone and desktop versions)
- Appropriate frequency; has to be worth your time; scale of project
- Use online tools to cross-promote, advertise, interlink.

Email

Table 1

- How does email compare to traditional mail?
 - There are some things that are better received via email and other things that are better communicated through traditional mail. When the City sends information through traditional mail, other items of interest could be consolidated into the mailing. Some of the people at Table 1 heard about the “What’sNext Alexandria” Dialogue via email from groups they are connected to or people they know.
- Is there a danger to sending out too many emails, forcing people to unsubscribe?
 - Yes. Personalization is important (see above).
- Is there a system that would enable citizens to only get the emails that pertain to them or their groups or networks?
 - There are ways that people can filter the number of email messages and/or frequency they receive messages – e.g., setting up “daily digest” messages on a “yahoo or google group” or registering for specific information from the City, such as Alexandria E-news for Emergencies. The idea of community ambassadors was recommended for tapping into existing City leaders who are willing to volunteer their time. There are many people here [at the “What’s Next Alexandria?” dialogue] who are willing to serve as volunteer ambassadors.
 - Another participant suggested paying citizens – or allowing them to make deductions from their property tax bill – to fulfill specific tasks or lead two-way communication activities.
- Is email an effective 2-way form of communication between the community and the City?
 - The problem with email is that the citizens don’t know if it is effective. There is a perception that the people who testify at City Hall carry more weight than those who send input via email. One person said that he still uses email communication, but he doesn’t really know if his suggestions are considered. It is important to summarize the email communication somehow, either by tallying up the pros and cons as data points or listing responses to frequently asked questions or noting frequently suggested policy or actions somehow. Maybe the summaries could be archived somehow (e.g., online forum or website) to build on the recommendation that the various communication methods be linked to one another and build a coherent picture of the recommendations

Group Announcements

Table 4:

1. When an announcement is made during a group meeting then the message is taken back to various networks by individuals who were in attendance when the announcement was made
2. Advantages: peer discussion ensure; face to face presentation works best for some group in the city (usurps email, literacy, etc. issues). Some groups have higher percentage of members who attending meetings (i.e., church)
Limitations: size of gathered group, timing of the announcement during the meeting.
3. Email or utilize social media to prepare group for coming announcements (listservs), allows for people to know what to expect or know even if they do not attend
 - Make announcements at beginning of meeting
 - Need a coordinator to get announcements to city groups
 - Have a prepared (briefly/short) flyer about the announcement with contact information
4. Need to distribute announcements in formats that are able to be copied and pasted or easily opened over a variety of software programs.

Table 7

Advantage:

- Known to group, have prior history
- Face to face communication, relationship
- Gives nonverbal context
- Provides another mode of communication

Disadvantage:

- If meeting is not well attended
- People don't have pencil and paper; inconvenient way to receive info; need multiple channels
- This is a good supplemental tool, doesn't replace formal announcement.
- Could be used to point people to more info. e.g., central calendar
- Clear steps: use backup copy – e.g. bring flyers to hand out. Need some policy or rule about making announcements. E.g. has to be on agenda
- Lots of context and issues regarding this tool
- What does it take? Committed individuals, an inclusive city calendar

Social Media

Table 2:

1. Create an online group on Linked In
 - Way for city to promote upcoming projects and gather feedback
 - Create an app/mobile website
2. Advantages:
 - no anonymous posting
 - se different social media tools
 - different people on Twitter & Facebook; reach individuals, not just groups
 - connects people with each other
 - easier to provide in multiple languages
 - reaching an active, established audience

Limitations:

- Demographics- some people aren't on social media
3. City staff to monitor
 - Create clear comm. Plan around social media
 - Committee of community members and city staff review and monitor
 - Easier to provide in multiple languages
 - Identify community people willing to post/tweet/update
 - No more than 1x per day for FB
 - Twitter – multiple times
 - Engaging games with prizes
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 4. Social media can be a good 2 way form of communication if responses/engagement is consistent
 Social media is important but should not be prioritized over project website = they should work together
 Someone would need to respond in a timely manner

Table 8:

- Type of information (e.g. qualitative, quantitative depth)
- Nonusers (access barriers, privacy concerns, choosing other communication tools)
- Language barriers
- Generational differences (especially effective with youth – has reduced youth apathy)
- Link to substantive sources
- Timely information (more often and cheaper than print media)
- Specialized purposes, advantages in certain areas
- One-way vs. two-way tool
- Media without responsibility (?) – you can plug in-like electricity – or not. Can be dangerous?)

Printed materials

Table 3:

- Bulletin boards?: barely look at them
- Noticed them on Mount Vernon ave in coffee shops
- In terms of management – not very managed
- Fairlington stores have them on windows, it catches your eye, having them at stores and windows is successful
- Windows and bulletin boards should be distinguished – store front should be separate
- Sometimes out-of-date, should be maintained and managed
- Places to wait – bus stops/metro stops
- Should be a brand to know it's a city process – maybe colors (Identity/branding)
- Each person can cause ripple effect, maybe we can put up the posters at places we frequent

- Contact of poster?: medium length – enough to understand
- Repetition in title
- Address why it's important and for who – 'uncle sam wants you'
- Name, contact, possible web address

- Citywide distribution?: should every meeting be advertised at same frequency; yes, no – maybe if it concerns only one neighborhood we don't need to know
- Saving money, sustainability – circulating email
- Print media – very local (specific)

Newspaper

Table 3:

- In terms of time should give you at least 2 weeks-month so you can plan
- Even though newspaper is online it features what's going on and highlights; you don't have to dig like you do with print
- Washington Post Thursday Insert: time consistency; good for disseminating info
- Gazette packet
- Alexandria times
- Old town crier
- Get department head to write letter to editor to focus attention on new projects – you can get two perspectives
- Generational difference is now creating different groups, more effort to target
- How to create excitement?
- Protect
- Branding – consistently composed
- Budgeting time is a good time to start creating comprehensive schedule/process – set agenda of what to communicate with media
- Timely communication – should let people know plans months in advance so people have a chance to read it before the vote.

Mail

Table 9:

1. Useful

Upcoming events, resources, that we can use; should be inexpensive, can put on bulletin board – e.g. ‘clean up’ – postcards

Put QR codes on it for those who use

2. Plus - keepable to put in hands; For people without computer access

Minus - We get too much mail – that’s not helpful

Cost

3. City should be topic of major importance or useful – citywide; evaluate current use of mail in community with residents. Could also use in small area plan implementation projects, e.g. neighborhoods?

Resident read what city sends, e.g. citywide clean up

4. See #3 - what can and can’t be recycled clean/collection schedules

Phone

Useful when:

- contacting civic associations, officers about upcoming important actions, e.g. when time is short.
- contacting property managers to get permission to call renters
- contacting those without computers (by choice or otherwise). E.g. aging disabled
- Most people screen, don’t answer, do not prefer to use phone for this purpose. Many don’t have land line
- Not to use as priority communications tool
- Ensure target audience wants or needs this community approach
- ‘A backwards step in time...’
- Identify targets for this type of communication upfront
- Ask people how they want to be contacted.
- Note: smart phone does not equal traditional
- City return calls if someone calls.