



Community Dialogue Forums as a Route to Shared Democratic Governance

Ronald J. McAllister, Elizabethtown College

“Public life is too important to be left solely to the professionals,” former Senator Bill Bradley once aptly said – and the small New England coastal town where I live is experimenting with new forms of collaboration between civil servants and civic-minded citizens. New England has a venerable history of town meetings, and our town had one until 1992, when citizens voted to do away with it because we had learned that activists could pack an auditorium for crucial votes and intimidate others with more tentative views. To allow wider participation and anonymity, secret ballot referenda were instituted instead. But many townspeople missed the dialogue in face-to-face meetings, so some of us looked for new ways to engage the public in formulating public policy. A small steering committee of active and respected citizens met for nearly a year and devised a plan for regular Community Dialogue Forums.

How Community Dialogue Forums Work

Community Dialogue Forums aim, as the statement of purpose puts it, “to identify what matters most to the people of the Town. The Community Dialogue is a grassroots organization which exists in order to gather ideas from those who love our town. It does this by sponsoring free and open discussions; both on-line and face-to-face. The Dialogue is a place where citizens can engage their neighbors, build relationships, and exchange views with one another.”

After the steering committee chose June 2010 for the first forum, facilitators were trained and salient issues identified. A form letter invited seventy-five local civic organizations to send delegates, and steering committee members followed up with calls or other kinds of personal contacts with group leader. The forum was advertised online and in the newspaper – and on a banner over the town’s main street.

To make the forum dialogues maximally participatory and constructive, rules of engagement were devised in the form of commandments: be concise so all will have a chance to speak; be respectful and courteous, allow others to speak without interruption; don’t put down or discredit others’ contributions; focus on issues and not on personalities; and it’s okay to have fun.

Community Dialogues in Action

On the appointed Saturday morning, the forum program involved a check-in and brief opening presentation and continued with two fifteen-minute rounds of questions. Any attendee could pose one question, which was assigned to a table for up to 45 minutes of citizen discussion. Facilitators were present for each table, and notes were typed up and forwarded to the town officials and boards deemed to have relevant jurisdiction.

Among the questions discussed were: How can we making the town more sustainable? What more can be
December 7, 2013 <https://scholars.org>

done for people with disabilities? What do we need to do to promote more affordable housing? Can bicycle and pedestrian safety be improved? How do we preserve the vitality of the village? Can we create an integrated space plan for the town?

After the first, subsequent forums were held in each of the next three years. By now, the results have found their way into official town policies and proceedings – and new policies have resulted to address issues ranging from sustainability to aligning town regulations with provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Some issues brought up at our town's forums have been incorporated into revisions to the town's Comprehensive Plan and included in projects to revitalize the commercial center of the village.

Lessons Learned

As our town experimented with the new Community Dialogue Forums, citizens and officials learned important practical lessons – and so did those of us who organized these events.

- People do hunger for active, face-to-face interaction, but success for the forums depended on more than just public announcements. Active outreach was necessary, including attracting a diverse group of participants through the leadership of the many civic organizations we mapped and contacted.
- Support from town hall was also important, including mailing and logistical support. Those of us who initiated this experiment did not want to be seen as a mere arm of municipal government, yet we also needed a degree of organizational legitimacy. A senior manager and town department head served on the steering committee, as did well-known citizens of the town.
- Neutral coordination was critical to making the forums an open and safe place for people to express their opinions. Regardless of individual views, steering committee members knew we had to help all attendees feel free to speak out.
- Our town's forums demonstrated that a representative assembly of active citizens can bring a new level of practicality to public decision making. Public officials are supposed to inform citizens of plans and get feedback before they move forward, but this does not always happen. Organized community forums can engage people before important decisions are made.

In our town, not every official was quick to embrace the idea of shared governance. Some officials stayed away from the dialogues because they were worried that standards of civility could not be enforced and town hall could be the target of criticism. Some employees of the town were afraid of being dragged into public controversies or drawn into professionally risky situations. In practice, though, this new approach to shared governance turned out to be quite workable and useful to officials and citizens alike.

Even as they let citizens interact, raise issues, and have their say, Community Dialogue Forums can help elected officials and professional managers tap into citizen talents and energy. Conventional public hearings are often poorly attended and perfunctory, leaving most citizens to think they were not consulted before a project gets going. Public officials themselves can feel left in the dark, and they do not hear many citizen concerns in a timely way. With more carefully planned and sustained interactions, Community Dialogue Forums can close gaps in communication and enable officials and citizens to work more effectively together for the greater public good.

