

Information and Communication Improvements

On April 4, 2009 at the regional civic engagement summit, the following question was asked:

To make public decision making better for all parties and increase mutual trust, what do we recommend as specific improvements for information and communication?

Summit attendee's response cards were reviewed and grouped into the following themes. After which, the attendees were asked to priority rank the themed actions.

Actions to Improve Communication

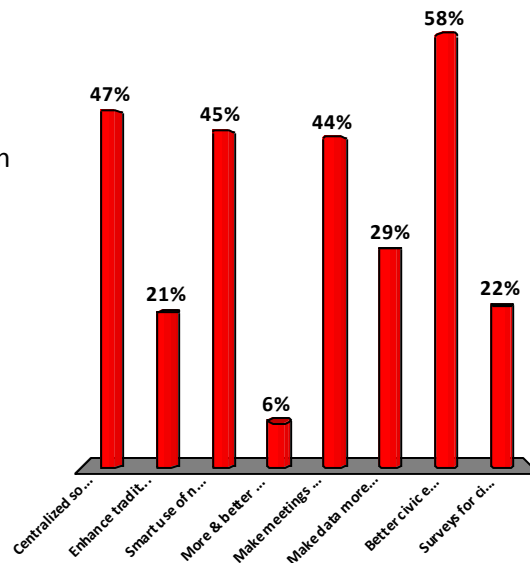
- Centralized source/organization for regional information
- Enhance traditional media for regional news/announcements – WHRO, TV news
- Smart use of new media: on-line forums, cell phone alerts
- More & better meetings
- Make meetings more accessible – take them into neighborhoods, televise
- Make data more accessible
- Better civic education
- Surveys for citizen input

Other Suggested Improvements for Communication

- Improve values
- Adoption of a formalized decision-making process
- Change in regional structure

Choose the 3 most important improvements to information and communication that will make the public process better.

1. Centralized source for regional information
2. Enhance traditional media
3. Smart use of new media
4. More & better meetings
5. Make meetings more accessible
6. Make data more accessible
7. Better civic education
8. Surveys for citizen input



The following is the complete list of suggestions received on index cards gathered during the break-out sessions at the summit. Most of the cards included multiple suggestions.

RECOMMENDATIONS for Information and Communication Improvements

True dialogue

More community rap sessions

Multi-level civic organizations from civic leader in government to civic league president (community leader) For example:

<u>City-Gov</u>	CCO	Civic leagues
Civic coordinator	Council of	&
to	Civic Org.	community organizations
Civic Academy to		
train citizens		

One newspaper!

Decide who/what organization is the regional voice – who will speak for HR?

-HRP, HRPDC, Mayors & Chairs, MPO, etc.

One central place where you can voice your opinion and see that it is being collected and responded to.
Use polls to collect information on-going

Certain planning info could be mandated of each city (such as specifics of classes of housing and income) put on a city Website to be available and comparable across the region.

A regional interacting Web site that identifies problems/needs and elicits citizen input.

Provide all citizens access through libraries, civic center (computers and training).

Region-wide blog involving issue experts and citizens in the broader sense.

Encouraging smaller focused group discussions.

I am very satisfied with the information and communication received from my county (James City) government. I do not receive much from the greater Hampton Roads region. It might be quite good – I just don't know. A Web site for the region with links to each government agency and/or aid organizations might be helpful.

The news media needs to be regulated so not to distort information.

Put all the city/county TV stations on some common channel accessible to all – perhaps through WHRO.

Create a unified radio channel to access for information.

Use the above as one teaching tool in all public (private, parochial?) schools.

To enhance regionalism, we need better information via regional media.

Use WHRO (both 89.5 and Channel 15) as the central information collection and distribution with regular scheduled programs to provide information to everyone.

Internet site will also catch other people.

Newspaper column written by official and citizen on an issue coming up for a public hearing – also column could be put on web site.

Local television news change their focus away from crime and weather to what is happening with government and our community.

Greater outreach into various communities, organizations, constituencies and populations by means of separate and understood and accepted forms of media and communication.

Use media to help educate us – radio, local TV and newspaper to follow more closely local (from civic leagues to city government) issues as they are discussed in these forums.

Above media to have clear forum (venue) for announcements of public meetings.

Make it easier for governmental and civic information to be located and in a timely fashion.

Better web sites, better use of media especially public access television.

Public meetings at a time when citizens can attend.

Internet/ways to make information more accessible to people/advertising/etc. -text messages/emails/new technology.

Employ new technology to reach citizens i.e. cell phones.

An alert system – “information alert” (delivery mode) could be set up that is transmittable through our phones, cellular and TV channels.

If it is really really urgent – text people or put on bulletin board or flash marquees for driving public.

Accessibility – prompt responses.

Utilize the internet to disseminate and collect opinions.

Create a forum for discussing outcomes online as well.

Encourage full disclosure and openness.

Make sure people feel their opinions matter.

Encourage.

Citizen email information (snail mail for those without computers) from local government on issues.

Moderated message board for exchange of opinion and questions.

Use Internet and local access cable to inform, blog, survey on important issues.

Using technology (email, Facebook) to increase engagement with citizens.

Being more open to accessing technological advances, Web/TV etc.

Online news, forums

Please note, the public is inundated with info from all sources.

The Internet – Bring intel on important issues.

More individualized announcements of public event, email, etc.

Annual or semi-annual publication of opportunities and contact points. Also for initiatives and ideas. Utilization of advising remarks, avoid editorial agendas.

Start local (neighborhoods) and look at ways to engage neighbors that depart from the traditions “civic organization” model. For example, make it project-oriented, like build a community garden or start a neighborhood business where the “neighbors” are also the owners. Form a small group, build on enlarging the circle where the ultimate purpose is engaging conversation on mutual areas of concern.

Use more technology to gather input from citizens and to distribute information.
On different levels – from neighborhoods to the region.
Discussion forums.

Neighborhood surveys (door to door) or through active civic leagues to discover how residents get information locally and how they would prefer to communicate their ideas/responses to government agencies.

Phone surveys.

Available reasonable time of day for meetings.
Announce notification.

First, you must understand each community and each neighborhood. , its culture, demographics. The results should provide the vehicle of reaching the citizens
Church groups, social clubs, radio, schools

Early citizen involvement when the debate on a public issue is starting – before the vested interests have come up with the “school solution” that government then tries to sell to the community under the guise of public outreach, public hearings.

Use information technology to educate and highlight the conversation between citizens and elected officials to make representative democracy work better.

A common shared repository for data, information and opinion, accessible to the public in a variety of ways – information portal.

Need basic background info on major regional issues (often hear only from people with a strong position – not broadly reasoned or understood)

Need to work through communities and across communities – maybe with “sister” civic leagues to facilitate understanding.

Have public decision making in each community for representation.
Educate them in each community.

Required reading for all involved in any regionalism attempt: “The Metrocrats: Regionalism and Non Law Governance are Destroying the US” by Jo Hindman (deceased)

Prove regionalism reduces cost, size and scope of government – SPSA – dismal failure of a regional entity.

More classes and instruction on civil discourse.

Public meetings held at more convenient times and venues.

Teach civic engagement in middle and high school focusing on communication - talking and listening –
“A Required Course”

There needs to be appropriate and numerous opportunities in various forms to receive citizen input and on the same level education so that the input is informed and productive.

Civic education in schools.

Values in society discussion.

Limit political financial campaign donations.

Citizens need knowledge/understanding of process and how to communicate.

Phone/Internet/survey/other.

Once a month have citizens email City Council with a concern or suggestion.

We need transparency from and greater openness in local and regional government. In addition, a greater willingness to listen to one another.

Add development of more comprehensive goals as result of more inclusive planning deliberations.

Be honest in reason for the decision – show proof of why – documentation with facts and actual figures.

Ensure what you’re deciding on is Constitutional and benefits all.

TRANSPARENCY

Unbiased media.

Full disclosure and transparency in all government operations and provide Web accessibility to that information.

Mutual trust =transparency in government.

One SPACE in newspaper to announce.

Web sites: news about issues.

Honesty.

Willingness to learn – open to different points of view.

More trust – If someone has been truthful in the past, then you would trust him.

Honesty, transparency, factual, no government involvement.

Make certain that all persons feel accepted – when information is given. Most persons are sensitive when they don’t know something. “Show response!”

Diversity begins with dialogue!

Learn-listen-live.

Do not feel that information quality and flow are the major issues. Getting people to engage is more important. Easing the sense of cynicism is important to accomplishing this.

Honest.

Listening to the other party “respectfully.”

Value the experiences, opinions, perspective of each party/group.

Authority figures should not be paternalistic with groups, people.

Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Address the disconnect between citizens not feeling asked to engage and leaders (supposed) desire for citizen engagement.

Greater shared sense of community.

Sincerity and transparency.

The fundamental issue is centered in the concept and principle of “representative” government and how do citizens communicate their interests and concerns to the people they have elected to “represent” them?

Increase mutual trust.

Actions from elected officials that **match** stated values and policy.

True transparency in government; an end to back room deals and rule by a select few.

Train/teach elected officials good listening techniques to use when citizens speak to them at all meetings or interactions.

Involve citizens in small meeting groups (face-to-face) first to build trust and open communication to get their input.

More good faith efforts by local governments to engage citizens – town meetings, panel discussions.
Move media engagement – local PBS, but especially local TV news, which is deplorable in its present state.

More regional emphasis by governments and media.

We are inundated with information but not always useful information.

Need more good local information.

Need training in how to evaluate information – reliability, etc.

Need more forums for regional conversations and regional planning.

Need to look at the journalistic model of focusing on conflict.

To make public decision making better and improve trust – transparency of government, recorded votes, open meetings, no decisions made in informal settings.

More detail and honesty in analysis and presentation of data to citizens.

More timely solicitation of citizen input – no narrowing option to government’s approved choices.

Greater transparency and access.

PBs Pro and con forums.

Red team options.

Distinguish between data, information and knowledge.

Issues always include how the solutions alternatives will be specifically financed.

Leadership commitment to effective listening and acting on the voice of the customers.

Information should be put on the Internet, be available at public libraries and public leaders and employees should answer questions!

There needs to be two-way communication.

Two or three minutes at a public hearing or council meeting and no chance to directly question our political leaders and get answers has put our government out of balance.

Restructure media outlets – newspaper-like but more like public dialogue, with opinion-oriented sections, content-based, feature-like-this outlet can be used to generate discussion, dispense in-depth info on complex issues, make citizens feel informed, engaged, participatory.

Local media should focus less on presenting facts and more on using facts, figures and info to get the community into the discussion so we can come up with the best answer to these issues.

Invite randomly selected specific people to attend citizen mid-size community meetings focused on identified community needs. Provide for two-way communications with learning and teaching from citizen and government. Allow these selected citizens to spread the word.

Communication must be open with full disclosure of government decisions, with valued input from citizens being used in the decision process.

Build trust between parties.

Value all inputs and ideas.

Include all data in decisions.

Greater representation from different segments – seniors, youth, physically-challenged etc.

Target groups by attending meetings.

Email updates.

More small group dialogue.

Neighborhood-level “issue” study circles or dialogues/forums.

More less formal official meetings developed in a format that entice citizen participation.

Greater use of technology to gain/ascertain majority views.

Creation of a large civic engagement effort including over 10,000 people using differing formats, online, phone, in-person. The results would be identification of the 100 most important HR issues and a report to the community would be updated on each goal monthly.

Leverage WHRO, libraries, use of Web and civic leagues.

Utilize charette process more often.

More “public information” meetings.

Start with context for decision making, use break out session for where we are as region, then focus on where we want to be.

Shared vision is fundamental.

Better availability of decision-making meetings.

Reduce the use of “Executive sessions” for local and state government deliberations.

Record all committee meetings and government discussions and post them on the Internet using streaming video that can be selected by agenda item.

Include all regional organizations that accept any tax funding.

Neighborhood, local and regional town hall meetings to solicit citizen input – the use of the automated tally devices is good.

Convey the message that leaders are listening rather than talking at citizens.

Involve elected leadership in forums such as this one.

More diverse opportunities to engage in open, level atmosphere of sharing (knowledge and questions) between public officials and public.

Respectful exchanges of information and viewpoints in a meaningful way before a decision needs to be made.

In a mass society, effective public-government communication must be a formalized process specifically organized by major institutions (public, private or non-profit)

More document on the Internet.

Greater notice of public meetings.

More diversity in forums for public input.

Government closer to the people through town hall meetings and local election reform, etc.

Bring the public in earlier in the process.

Openly share information – good and bad – and enlist citizens in overcoming those challenges. Too often, “communications” is perceived as spin.

Use more modern technology – Facebook, twitter, Internet conversations and Web page access.

Enhance feedback opportunities from public from all of the above. Using all of above, collate surveys and make available.

Finding ways to get information out to, and information from, people who are underrepresented as evidenced by data in report.

Those living here less than 15 years

Those with incomes less than 50,000

Diverse in Race (A.F. Americans, Hispanics, etc.)

Youth

Forming structures at neighborhood level for communication.

Make all information/data used by local and regional decision makers available to anyone interested with non-biased analysis available by a non biased source, i.e. business school.

Information on issues should be more readily available for all citizens – via – Internet, news and an easy method for people to respond and be tabulated.

Do not have to feel out of the loop if not readily involved.

Some mechanism to effectively provide public information on alternatives for decision.

Better and credible mechanism for public input on selecting driving alternatives.

Making available information relevant to citizens (not those relevant to governments) i.e. accessibility of information.

Feedback on public input e.g. what was done with comments/input from citizens.

A way to get and exchange information in a timely and convenient way. Accessible anytime and allows multiple ways to become involved.

“Civic” colleges – behind the scenes look at how government works. Speakers, workshops, discussions.

Data availability.

Use universities as an asset for collection and analysis.

Develop a neutral source of reliable data.

Technology solution – Some level of moderated discussion forums and social media (Web) to both receive information but also provide voice of citizens re surveys, etc. . Not the only channel of communication, but one readily available one.

For more citizens to take advantage of opportunities that are made available to them – attend scheduled meetings.

Neighborhood meetings for discussion of mutual concerns.

More informal discussions by neighborhood/city/region. Town hall meetings are too formal and make dialogue threatening and intimidating.

Use of Internet sites which are more user friendly and geared toward citizens not bureaucrats.

Childcare.

Meeting notices.

On major issues – have public comment meetings and then provide responses to topics of concern.

Specific improvements

- Frequent

- Reliable

- Consistent source

- Truthful

- Opportunity for feedback/response

- Accurate records of information – transmission/receipt

Need more community rap sessions.

More community newsletters.

More citizen-led and organized forums (like this one) to capture collective insights of citizens.

A regular forum where all views are welcome and where citizens can express their views.

Have more community meetings to inform and discuss issues.

Increase involvement in HRCCE or equal.

Create one regional system to facilitate consensus toward decision making across the region.

Eliminate “closed” City Council meetings except in the case of sensitive employment issues.

Survey citizens regularly after making good faith efforts to inform them.
Teach leadership and empowerment skills – widely.

The need to make the playing field level – have to do away with the digital division.
Citizens have to be educated in the ways that are most effective for their group and education level.

City level government officials should have a consistent means to communicate/interact with their constituency. Personal interaction is the best means of communication. The Internet, email, and telephone, TV all complimentary means.

Involve citizens in strategic planning for their area.
Use civic clubs, but not exclusively, to access citizens.

Provide space for individuals to express ideas and give them a notion that their opinions will be respected.

All forms of communication mediums to be accessible to the public – blogs (Internet) public access (equal time for dissenting opinion) TV and radio and newspaper
Forums held with time of the day the majority of citizens can be available or have multiple opportunities at different times and days.

Those who have the money have the access and influence.

All voices need to be reached out to and given the opportunity to be heard from. If there is not a response then civic leaders have done their part. As long as they reached out to the places people can be found.

Contextualization – Citizens, all civic leaders must realize they speak from their own context – (race, income, gender, time in region) and recognize that is not the only context. So we have to “put our cards on the table” and recognize we form our opinions and biases on our context.

A Website with frequent public broadcasts (radio, billboards, TV, etc.) to advertise checking in. A call-in number for people without Internet.

Informal “town halls” at hours mutually available to all – also available online.

Vision process in region – all citizens are brought together (in person, online, via phone) to decide what are our regional priorities and to establish work groups around priorities including established organizations on potential need for new non profits.

Everyone is on an equal playing field and has the same voice, same “weight” to their voice.

Somebody needs to go where people are to get their input – not expect them to go to meetings at awkward times, with no public transit available. For example: to neighborhood organizations, fairs, PRAs, churches and synagogues.

Use multiple ways of input – video, ballots.

Use the Internet to throw out questions, get short answers, get long answers, etc.

Create outreach strategies that respond socio-culturally, socio-economically aimed at reaching diverse audiences through inclusion.

Move the meetings away from city hall and hold them in the neighborhoods.

Provide child care area at meetings.

Hand out fliers at frequently visited places i.e. WalMart.

Vary times.

Leaders should follow up with more info and the process should be less technical and presented by a group's peers.

All public bodies should televise, Webcast, podcast and transcribe their proceedings and deposit/post those records on publicly accessible Web sites and public libraries.

FOIA modified to make records of closed meetings accessible to the public after a decision has been made.

Monthly mailing/emailing to citizens about meeting on decisions.

Organized town hall meetings to create more opportunities for input to be passed.

More collaboration between community groups for transparency sake and options for blogging to generate discussions.

Segregate mundane information from milestone or decision-related information in government news dissemination.

Modernize service request portals and information availability.

Increase trust and information flow.

Ensure the purity of data – don't accept any number thrown on the table – check it out.

No propaganda.

No "managed" information.