

# HOW TO

# A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO ENGAGING THE PUBLIC AT A TOWN HALL MEETING

KENTUCKY LEAGUE OF CITIES COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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# HOW TO ENGAGE THE PUBLIC

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>How to Engage the Public</b> .....	3
• Before the Engagement.....	3
• During the Engagement.....	5
• After the Engagement.....	6
<b>Toolkit Resources</b> .....	7
• Potential Constituency Groups .....	7
• Sample Sign-in Sheet.....	8
• Sample Agenda.....	9
• Sample Frequently Asked Questions.....	10
• Sample Opening Comments.....	11
• Sample Invitations.....	12
- Formal Letter .....	12
- Sample Radio/Public Access TV Audio PSA .....	13
- Sample Posting for Facebook and/or Twitter .....	13
- Suggested Website or Newsletter Copy.....	14
<b>Bonus Content</b> .....	15
• How to Engage Young Adults in Community Development .....	15



## HOW TO ENGAGE THE PUBLIC

There are some issues and community initiatives that need the input of the general public.

In order to gain as large an attendance as possible for an important community meeting, every elected official and staff member must put forth maximum effort. A good attendance is crucial to having input for city constituencies. People will only respond to your personal invitation. Putting an ad in the paper will not work. Having an announcement on the radio will not work. You must extend a personal invitation.

Reaching out to people is as easy as:

1. A personal letter signed by you and addressed to everybody in your address book. This should include constituencies, coworkers, neighbors, family, and friends.
2. A personal email sent to everybody in your address book.
3. A phone call to personal friends, neighbors and family members.
4. A post on your personal Facebook page that offers information about the meeting with a link to the city's website and/or Facebook page for more information.

Probably the best way to connect with citizens is through personal contact – at work, in your neighborhood, at the grocery, a social event or church, or while you're picking up a child from school or activities – anytime and anywhere you have a minute to mention it to someone. Ask your hairdresser, dry cleaner and small business owners. You should make up to (but not limited to) 50 personal contacts about the event. Also, ask these people to invite their families and friends to attend as well.

This can be as simple as asking “Are you able to come to our meeting about the future of the city on February 16 at 6:00 p.m.?”

The only way people in your community will come to a meeting held by the city is if they are personally invited.

We recommend an experienced, unbiased, meeting facilitator to lead this type of public engagement session. To assist in preparing for this type of event, the following checklist may be useful:

### BEFORE THE ENGAGEMENT:

- Identify the target audience and invite them via personal invitation (in person, by phone, email, text, Facebook, and Twitter).
- Decide where you will meet and when (handicap accessible).
- Invite the media (it is a public meeting).
- Clearly state the purpose – set the desired outcomes and expectations beforehand.
- Select a welcoming, nonthreatening environment that is familiar to people; public school cafeterias are a great choice.
- Consider the room layout. Presenting information or obtaining input will dictate whether you use a stage versus having everyone on the same level.



- Determine if tables will be needed or just chairs. Will you need to present via PowerPoint, wall maps or another visual aide? Consider using microphones and a podium.
- Have a clearly stated, timed agenda. Work with the facilitator ahead of time to determine what happens if time runs out before comments are finished. Have a plan.
- Identify who will lead the meeting, who will take notes.
- Make certain all elected officials are aware of the purpose of the meeting and their role during the meeting.
- Create an agenda not to exceed two hours. Limit to one-and-a-half hours if possible.
- If you need to explain any aspect related to the purpose of the meeting, prepare materials as appropriate and ensure there are enough copies for all who attend. Consider using Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) or a one pager (front/back) to describe or explain complex information.
- Prepare a media packet, if necessary.
- Determine how the information will be disseminated after the meeting. If you ask people to provide input, be sure you honor their time and contribution by doing something with it after the meeting. Even if you take no action, at minimum, acknowledge the input in some fashion.
- Test all equipment to ensure technology works properly.
- Have a uniformed officer in attendance.

Questions to consider as you prepare for a public meeting.	Yes	No	Not Certain
Is there a specific audience or group that needs to attend based upon the topic or issue to be discussed?			
Is there a clear purpose for the engagement?			
Have you identified outcomes you want to come away with?			
Is the agenda tight enough to get to desired outcomes in less than two hours?			
Are there ways to acknowledge citizen participation after the meeting, even if no action is taken?			
Do you need informational handouts or media packets?			
Are elected officials aware of their role during the meeting?			



## DURING THE ENGAGEMENT:

- Meet/greet prior to the start – welcome folks and thank them for coming.
- Have a sign-in sheet to obtain record of attendance and to get contact information for follow-up opportunities.
- Provide agendas.
- Provide refreshments.
- State the purpose of the gathering.
- Set a tone of positive energy – don't avoid negative issues. Acknowledge them and move on.
- Establish the fact that this meeting is not a problem-solving or decision-making meeting. It is a time to share information and gather data.
- Have someone on hand to address unrelated city problems – announce who that individual is and ask attendees to present their problem to this person so it can be addressed.
- State the rules up front.
  - o Establish the amount of time each person may speak.
  - o Each person may speak one time until everyone in attendance has had an opportunity.
  - o Provide alternative ways to supply more input/feedback – personal visit, email, phone call – and follow up.
  - o We want your ideas and thoughts. Please be respectful of each other...and you will receive respect.
  - o Please don't verbally attack someone. Help us get to ideas and solutions.
- Restate and record every idea – summarize as necessary but be sure that the person agrees with the way you've stated the idea or comment - reword if necessary.
- State how the information obtained during the meeting will be used.
- State where the information obtained during the meeting can be found afterwards – online, printed report, etc.
- State when the information will be available.
- Stay on schedule. Be prepared to pivot to completion should time run out.
- At the conclusion, thank people for participating and attending.
- Leave the door open for people to continue the dialogue, and tell them how to do so.
- Encourage people to share more ideas, and tell them how they can do so.
- Provide a contact name, phone number, or email address to everyone.



Questions to consider in anticipation of the public engagement.	Yes	No	Not Certain
Is the facilitator aware of potential areas of concern or potential disruption?			
Would it be appropriate for the council members to be greeters or serve refreshments?			
Should council members be seated as the elected body or dispersed within the crowd in order to talk with and listen to constituents?			

**AFTER THE ENGAGEMENT:**

- Use the city’s social media presence to post, print, or publish the information obtained during the meeting as soon as possible – usually no later than 24 hours after the event.
- In the posting, state where and when the meeting took place and how citizens can still submit their ideas and comments.
- Summarize the comments by topic or theme – this becomes the launch pad for new ideas and potential strategies.
- Prepare a media release to ensure pertinent information is disseminated to the public at large.
- If needed, create a database using the sign-in sheet. Use the email addresses to inform/update the participants on action taken or not taken.

Questions to consider after the engagement is completed.	Yes	No	Not Certain
Did you get the information you needed? If not, determine how best to obtain it.			
Will you need or want to stay in touch with the people who attended the meeting?			
Are there a variety of ways the information obtained from the meeting might be shared?			
Is there a deadline for any final comments to be included?			
Should the city offer any alternative methods for community input? (A survey for example.)			



## TOOLKIT RESOURCES

### COMMUNITY CONSTITUENCY GROUPS

- 1) Rotary Club
- 2) Jaycees
- 3) Optimist Club
- 4) Lions Club
- 5) Garden Club
- 6) Red Hatters Society
- 7) Men's Club
- 8) Woman's Club
- 9) Area Development District
- 10) Economic Development Council
- 11) Industrial Development Authority
- 12) Chamber of Commerce
- 13) Main Street/Downtown Development
- 14) Environmental Organizations/Recycling
- 15) Arts Community – Theatre; Musicians; Artists; Sculptors
- 16) Sister Cities
- 17) Ethnic Organizations
- 18) Educational Institutions – Public and Private
- 19) Financial Institutions
- 20) Recreation Board
- 21) Airport Board
- 22) Tourism
- 23) Veterans Foundation
- 24) Historical Society
- 25) Public Library
- 26) Utility Companies/Franchises
- 27) U.S. Forest Service
- 28) UK Extension Service
- 29) Major Employers
- 30) News Media
- 31) City Government
- 32) County Government
- 33) City/County Fire Department Representatives (1 each)
- 34) EMS
- 35) County Sheriff's Office
- 36) City Police Department
- 37) Kentucky State Police
- 38) Realtors Association
- 39) Home Builders Association
- 40) Habitat for Humanity
- 41) Social Services – Housing; Homeless; Children's Advocacy; Rape Crisis; Pregnancy Center
- 42) Student Government – High School and College/University
- 43) County Officials
- 44) City Officials
- 45) Public Defenders Office
- 46) Judges
- 47) Post Office(s)







## SAMPLE AGENDA

1. Welcome
2. Introduction of city council/commission members, elected state officials and distinguished guests
3. Brief overview – purpose of the meeting, provide materials as needed regarding topic or issue to be discussed
4. Introduction of the facilitator
5. Introduction of anyone that may be presenting
6. Facilitated discussion
7. What are the next steps?



## SAMPLE FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

1. Why is the meeting taking place? Briefly describe why the meeting has been called and what will be done during the event.
2. Who is hosting the meeting? Describe how the meeting will be conducted and by whom.
3. What areas are open for discussion during the meeting? Specify what is to be discussed and clearly state parameters.
4. What is a person committing to should they attend? Describe what is expected of those attending. Inform them of how much time you anticipate the meeting to take and that you want their ideas/suggestions/input. Explain how they could be involved after the meeting, if there are opportunities.
5. When and where will the meeting take place? Will there be food? How long will it last?
6. Who can tell me more? List a point of contact with options of email and phone number.



## SAMPLE OPENING COMMENTS

1. Welcome
2. Thanks to mayor and council
3. Introduce yourselves
4. Why I was asked to facilitate
  - a. Personal introduction
  - b. My reason for being here tonight is to facilitate your speaking and the mayor and council's listening, that's it
5. Format – instructions to attendees
  - a. Come to the mic
  - b. State your name and address the first time. Only state your name if we have time for people to speak more than once. I don't know you even though your neighbors probably know you. \_\_\_\_\_ will be taking notes of the comments that are made.
  - c. No one is taking questions. You may pose one, but you will not receive a response during this meeting. Why? The mayor and council/commission want to listen to your comments tonight. There will be time for questions and discussion later – after the meeting, in the grocery store, at the council/commission meeting, at city hall, on the phone, at church. Somewhere else.
  - d. There is a three-minute time limit for speaking. Why?
    - i. We want everyone to have an opportunity to speak. We don't want anyone to monopolize the time. If you need to have a longer time to speak with the mayor or council/commission, you may do so somewhere else.
    - ii. Because the purpose is to hear your comments. Make your points precise and clear. Persuasive grandstanding and lecturing are not helpful or permitted tonight.
  - e. When I signal that your time has expired, please acknowledge and return to your seat. We will enforce the time limit.
  - f. We thank you for being here, and we do look forward to your comments.
  - g. So now, if you would like to speak, please come to the microphone, state your name and address, and present your comments.



## SAMPLE INVITATIONS

### FORMAL LETTER

Insert Date

*RE: Strategic Plan – Community Listening Session – March 19, 2022*

Dear “Name of City” Resident or Business Owner:

As you may or may not know, “Name of City” has embarked on formulating a strategic plan for your community. This plan will help the Council/Commission focus its resources on improvements which will be selected based on resident and business input.

As part of our strategic planning process, I would like to invite you to a Community Listening Session scheduled for March 19, 2022 at the “Name of City” High School Cafeteria, located at \_\_\_\_\_, in ”Name of City”. The meeting will begin at 6:00 p.m. and will last approximately two (2) hours.

Representatives from the Kentucky League of Cities will facilitate the discussion. I know that you are committed to the improvement of our community, and I want to hear your thoughts and ideas about the future as it relates to the Council/Commission of “Name of City”. It’s really your chance to discuss dreams and progress – for you, your family, our businesses and our community at large.

Every thought is important! I urge you to become involved in our collective effort to ensure that “Name of City” is prepared for the future and constantly improving the quality of life of its residents. Please bring your neighbors, friends and family to join you at the meeting. It is so important for our children and grandchildren – we need to put some time and thought into what we would like for our future generation.

Having a town meeting is serious business, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t have an enjoyable time being with one another and listening to all of the ideas that our neighbors will share. Your ideas are important to me and to the future of this place that we call home. It’s a small length of time to invest when you consider the tremendous opportunity that we have. “Name of City” has a bright future because of people like you, and I trust I can count on you to take part in this important step for our future.

Sincerely,

Your name here

Council/Commission of “Name of City”



## SAMPLE RADIO/PUBLIC ACCESS TV AUDIO PSA

### #1 "Name of City's Future"- 45 seconds

What could it mean for "Name of City" if we all worked together to build the kind of community we want for our children? A community that supports business, culture, and our natural environment and respects our history by growing intentionally. You can be part of the process by participating in the Community Listening Session, a collaborative event hosted by the "Name of City". It's free and open to the public. For more information, please call \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

### #1 "Name of City's Future"- 15 seconds

What could it mean for "Name of City" if we all worked together to build the kind of community we want for our children? You can be part of the process by participating in the Community Listening Session hosted by the "Name of City" on March 19 at 6:00 at the "Name of City" High School Cafeteria. For more information, call \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

## SAMPLE POSTING FOR FACEBOOK AND/OR TWITTER

Please come to the Community Listening Session on March 19 at 6:00 p.m. at the "Name of City" High School Cafeteria. For more information, call \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

What does the future hold for our community? Join in the discussion on March 19 at 6:00 p.m. at the "Name of City" High School Cafeteria. For more information, call \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

Are you coming to the Community Listening Session on March 19 at 6:00 p.m. at the "Name of City" High School Cafeteria? To learn more, call \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.



## SUGGESTED WEBSITE/NEWSLETTER COPY #1

*“Name of City” Future*

Together, we can build a brighter future for the residents and businesses of “Name of City.” Your community leaders believe that people who get involved in civic work and strive to be good neighbors can move mountains. That’s why we made the commitment to sponsor a Community Listening Session — a public meeting that invites everybody to be a part of making our town a better place to live. The meeting will be held on March 19 at the “Name of City” High School, located at \_\_\_\_\_, in “Name of City.” For more information, call \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

*Let’s put our heads together for a better future!*

## SUGGESTED WEBSITE/NEWSLETTER ARTICLE COPY #2

*“Name of City” Future*

We invite you to join the conversation on how to build a brighter future for children, families, and businesses of “Name of City”. City leaders believe that people who get involved in civic work and strive to be good neighbors can move mountains. That’s why we made the commitment to sponsor the Community Listening Session—a public meeting that invites everybody to be a part of making our town a better place to live.

The Community Listening Session welcomes and encourages every citizen to step up and make their voice heard. This is your opportunity to voice your opinions, help choose community priorities and then work with others to make grassroots changes that creates the future we all want.

The Community Listening Session will be collaborative and transparent. The meeting will be facilitated by community and economic development advisors with the Kentucky League of Cities and will be held on Thursday, March 19 at 6:00 at the “Name of City” High School, located at \_\_\_\_\_ in “Name of City.” For more information, call \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

*Let’s put our heads together for a better future!*

###

## BONUS CONTENT

### ENGAGING YOUNG ADULTS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

To create opportunities for change, city leaders must do more than engage young people in focus groups or invite a select few to offer advice. Cities need to find effective ways to involve large numbers of young adults in the core work of community building.

#### I. Be intentional.

Research shows that young people who are asked to participate in community change are more likely to get involved than those who are not.

#### II. Recruitment strategies should concentrate on places where young people spend time.

- Schools
- Youth-serving organizations (scouts, band, Beta Club, etc.)
- Faith-based organizations
- Community centers
- Malls
- Recreation areas (skate parks and basketball courts)
- Online gaming or other tech-oriented gathering spaces

Organizations interested in long-term community change need to have a long-term recruitment plan.

Intentional strategies to consider

- Diversity
- Revolving door opportunities as youth age
- Integration of new young adults and new ideas
- Identify future leaders to replace those that will be graduating or moving
- Empower/invite/give permission for youth to serve and lead – this also creates buy-in
- Ask young adults to find their own replacements before they depart
- Coordinate plans for young adults to have an opportunity to lead



III. Young people need a home base that provides steady connections to adults who can build a team, broker opportunities and facilitate relationships with other adults, organizations and businesses.

Things to consider

- Allow young adults to collaborate on the selection of a location
- Identify what resources are needed
- Who will be their point of contact

IV. Have a solid engagement plan.

Be clear about why you are engaging young people in the first place. A strategic planning process can jump-start your young adult participation. The keys are:

- Get started
- Be intentional
- Be consistent
- Evaluate and modify as needed

V. Identify the issues.

To integrate young people into existing community change agendas, work with them to connect to the issues they are passionate about. This will typically be those issues that affect them on a regular basis and are part of their life experiences. Show them the full scope of the specific problem that has been identified and how it relates to other community challenges as well as to community assets.

- Help young adults feel connected by giving them permission to participate
- Encourage young adults to learn more about the issue, do their own research
- Link the community issues to what they are passionate about
- Connect the issue to broader community challenges
- Link challenges to root causes
- Make it simple





#### VI. Create adult/young adult teams.

Develop teams in which young adult and adults work together and share a common purpose, goals and strategy for affecting change.

- Continually review community issues being worked on to remain relevant
- Encourage adults to actively mentor young adults and provide training and resources as needed
- Compensation/rewards

You may wish to consider compensating young people through school credits or other creative strategies such as discounts to businesses.

#### VII. Build capacity.

Supporting young people to fulfill specific roles in community improvement work prepares them to negotiate spaces where young adults are not typically present.

- Continual training of trainers
- Model behaviors
- Continual recruitment
- Develop skill sets
- Teach young adult leaders what their role is, then be repetitive before they fly solo

#### VIII. Support system.

Some attention to individual needs is critical, especially when dealing with youth and young adults who have weak support systems and high stressors. The challenge is balancing what is good for the young person with what is good for the community.

- Identify what skills are needed from adult leaders for each issue
- Seek opportunities to collaborate with other community organizations
- Determine where the gaps in skills are and work to fill the gaps
- Model coping skills



## IX. Connecting to the world.

Developing deliberate linkages to other organizations in the community that have a stake in community change can expand opportunities for meaningful young adult participation.

- Identify audiences and encourage young adults to tell their version of the story
- Utilize multiple communication outlets
- Work within the organizational structure to provide an outlet for young adults to be the story tellers

## X. Sharing the knowledge.

Providing clear channels for youth and young adults to present their findings and recommendations to key decision-making bodies, such as elected officials or community coalitions and the public, are essential to facilitating and sustaining young adult involvement. It also gives policy makers the opportunity to see young people where they normally don't — in the halls of government — which helps them to connect with young people as their constituency rather than as invisible, nonvoting citizens.

- Provide opportunities where young adults can speak about issues important to them
- Provide a place for young adults to get hands-on experience with making recommendations on community issues, then following the process through to implementation
- Model behaviors and teach the methods necessary to take a plan and put it into action

### Take-Aways:

1. If we don't teach future leaders how to implement community development, there will be no future leaders.
2. Model the desired behaviors, then give leaders permission to try.

Source: [http://forumfyi.org/files/FINALYouth\\_Engagment\\_8.15pdf.pdf](http://forumfyi.org/files/FINALYouth_Engagment_8.15pdf.pdf)

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