

Community Engagement Highlights from APA 2016

As I do every year at the APA National Conference, I did my best to catch as many community engagement sessions as possible. Here are highlights, takeaways, and the common threads I noticed this year.

Dave Biggs | @MetroQuest | April 14, 2016,

American Planning Association

[Southern Nevada Strong](#), a HUD funded regional planning effort for Las Vegas and the surrounding region.

Whether you attended the APA 2016 National Conference or not, you likely missed some of the great dialogue on community engagement, because the program was packed. As I do every year, I did my best to catch as many highlights, takeaways, and trends as possible. Here are ones that stood out for me from my four days in Phoenix. Please join the discussion in the comments to share your own takeaways.

2016 National Planning Excellence Award for Public Outreach

The big community engagement prize winner this year was [Southern Nevada Strong](#), a HUD funded regional planning effort for Las Vegas and the surrounding region. The project team shown receiving the award above was led by the city of Henderson. This project exemplified best practices in community engagement in numerous ways. Three things struck me about their effort: massive online engagement in English and Spanish, multiple supporting strategies to target typically underrepresented groups, and unique urban ethnographic research partnership with the University of Nevada. The [APA describes](#) how their efforts paid off, "SNS received unprecedented community engagement and collaboration among local municipalities. The engagement efforts set a new standard among Sustainable Communities grant recipients. An estimated 6,000 community **members participated in the process and nearly 70,000 inputs were received...**" Congratulations to the SNS team and all of this year's Public Outreach award applicants.

The need to better define social equity

One workshop on social equity sparked some valuable ideas. Cali Kay Williams from New York City Economic Development Corporation suggested that a more consistent definition of social equity is needed. She felt that given the looseness of the term, groups can cherry pick the elements that are most convenient to them and claim that their process meets the criteria. The dialogue then went further, suggesting that we need to better define metrics for community engagement, especially as they relate to social equity. So often we hear about how many people were engaged and not about the diversity of the participants.

The importance of educating the community during the engagement process

Jamie Greene from planning NEXT spoke about the challenge that many community members do not have the information they need to make choices that we are giving them. As an example he suggested, "We need to help people understand the financial implications of the choices during the community engagement on your comprehensive plan."

Other sessions built on this idea highlighting techniques like participatory budgeting and scenario planning that use interactive educational tools to highlight benefits, tradeoffs and real world constraints into the community engagement process. Victor Dover spoke about the [Seven50](#) project in Southern Florida that presented scenarios online for the community input. The scenarios

illustrated the costs and benefits of alternatives and after over 2,700 participants had their say, to their surprise they found that over 73 percent of people preferred the scenario that focused on smart growth principles. He credited the educational components of the process with that outcome.

The rise of targeted community engagement

The award-winning Southern Nevada Strong team and many panelists this year were talking about the success they had dovetailing traditional and online engagement with targeted engagement to ensure broad representation. To be fair, targeted engagement is not new, but there is a dialogue emerging about the benefits and strategies for evaluating the gaps using a demographic analysis and then using specific strategies to target the missing voices.

Darlene Walser of Hennepin County in a panel session entitled "Community Engagement in TOD Station Planning" talked about a three-level community engagement strategy. She recommended beginning with a baseline communications strategy followed by a formal public participation process and finally targeted engagement. It was this last phase where they had success leveraging partnerships with community groups to target difficult to reach audiences.

Multigenerational engagement strategies from Baby Boomers to Gen Z

One of the most interesting sessions for me was the panel on "Picking the Right Tool: Multigenerational Engagement." Each of the panelists covered one generation and talked about their characteristics and strategies to engage them. There were many takeaways. The ones that stuck out for me were the lessons about Gen X and younger cohorts that they described as underrepresented in face to face community engagement.

Linda Vela of the Alamo Area Metropolitan Planning Organization talked about Gen X born between the early 1960s and early 1980s. She described this cohort as fiercely independent, informal by nature, outcomes-focused and many caring for kids at home. Gen X are generally poorly represented in face to face community meetings so online and other alternative engagement strategies are suggested. Online, facebook is their preferred social platform and most will use laptop or desktop computers to surf the net over mobile.

Tina Geiselbrecht of Texas A&M Transportation Institute talked about millennials or Gen Y born between the early 1980s to the early 2000s. Like Gen X, millennials are interested in engaging online though most access the internet on mobile devices and choose Instagram and Snapchat more than facebook so campaigns to leverage those networks can be effective.

Trish Wallace of the city of San Antonio talked about Gen Z or boomlets born between the early 2000s and early 2010s. She talked about the benefits of using games and craft activities at community events to engage even the youngest residents. The results were compelling and these activities also gave planners an informal opportunity to talk to parents while the little ones were busy. Many of the tweens in this cohort are glued to their devices and love taking selfies. Trish talked about engagement strategies that invited people to take selfies in places related to the project as a way to engage youth in the dialog about community planning.

I tip my hat to these planners who took every opportunity to broaden the community engagement to include each cohort.

Creative ways to combine face to face and online engagement

In years past online engagement has been presented like a silver bullet touted to solve all of community engagement's challenges. This naive notion seems to have dissipated and the dialogue now has turned to a toolkit approach to leverage the strengths of a variety of engagement tactics. Michelle Nance of the Centralina Council of Governments demonstrated this well as she presented their project called [Connect Our Future](#), a regional growth plan for greater Charlotte, NC. Early in the process they engaged over 400 participants in one of the largest [Reality Check](#) events ever held.

These hands-on workshops allow participants to allocate expected growth using chips or legos on large-scale regional maps. The four scenarios that emerged from this process were then loaded into the MetroQuest online engagement tool to allow the broader community to assess and provide input on the scenario options. Nance reported that over 8,400 people were engaged and closed by saying with satisfaction that, "Everyone said it would be impossible to reach consensus but we beat the odds." What struck me the most is the value of the co-creative process of coming up with the scenario alternatives with hands on input from residents early in the process before going out to the broader community online.

Techniques for dealing with contentious groups and individuals

The heat must be on because several sessions highlighted tools and techniques for dealing with contentious participants at community meetings. I was pleased to see these as they add our ongoing dialog in the [Fiasco Files](#). Della Rucker of the Wise Economy Workshop ran a session called "Manage the Ax-Grinders: Do Better Public Participation" and led participants through role play exercises and provided tips on dealing with disruptions. In particular she highlighted the value of breaking into smaller group discussion to encourage people to work together constructively while also giving more time for each participant to speak.

Roberta Rewers of the APA led a session on "Working with Contentious Groups" and provided helpful tips to prepare planners for community meetings. She highlighted the need to establish and reinforce rules of civil discourse and define the purpose and agenda of the meeting early on. When disruptions happen she recommended that leaders do not debate, mind their manners, thank individuals for the comment and do what they can to stay on track and stick to their key messages.

Participants chimed in with additional suggestions including sitting down and talking with a vocal community member in advance of the project moving forward to allow them to be heard while avoiding public disruptions.

One participant said that when seeking community input, tables in the round didn't work in his community as like-minded people would band together and make people with a different opinion feel **like outsiders. This may be another reason to heed Della's advice and break participants up into table discussions.**

The spirit of these discussions was about giving people equal opportunities to be heard and avoiding disruptions that might compromise the right of other participants to have their say by either dominating the dialogue, hijacking the agenda or intimidating others so they are afraid to speak up.

Building trust and creating an engaged community

Several panelists highlighted the frustration that many community members feel about not feeling like they have been heard. Begin transparently about **what's on the table and how the community** input will be used was a common theme. This year more than ever, panelists were talking about the value of communicating with the community following the engagement to reinforce the value of participation. Darlene Walser of Hennepin County commented that, "When people start seeing what they say reflected in the plans they remain engaged and engage again next time."

Overall, APA 2016 did not disappoint. It had community engagement enthusiasts looking for a cloning machine. I look forward to hearing other insights that people took away from their time in Phoenix.



Dave Biggs

Dave Biggs is an internationally-recognized speaker, author and public engagement strategist focusing on best practices to supercharge community participation for planning projects.