



## Closing the Loop

### **The Importance of Follow-Up in Community Engagement**

Many agencies devote a great deal of time to planning and executing a public outreach event or campaign. The preparation of materials, advertisements, hashtags, and venue reservations can consume staff members for months. Yet your outreach hardly ends when the last cookie is consumed and the last survey dropped in the box. All too often, agencies forget that what happens afterwards may be the most important part. Why and how should you follow up with the public who takes time to get involved in your program?

### **The Problem**

Focus groups of diverse populations throughout New Jersey revealed that one of the primary reasons that many people do not engage with public agencies or attend public meetings is because they do not have confidence that anyone is listening. They may have showed up once to protest a new bike lane on their street, but it got built anyway. They may have attended a meeting but felt that officials were talking as if the decision was already made. Or they may have been excited about a proposed improvement and filled out a survey to show their support, but never heard another word about it again.

### **Building Relationships of Trust**

Across the country, public agencies are leading the way in a new vision for public outreach. Agencies can earn the community's trust by demonstrating that when people participate, their opinions are heard. Following up after participation gives the agency credibility and shows that they value the community. It also helps residents feel that their valuable time was well-spent in participating, encouraging them to devote time again in the future.

### **But How?**

Whether your outreach effort is a meeting, a pop-up event, or all via social media, be sure to first determine the best way to follow up with your participants. On social media, this may be straightforward. At a meeting or pop-up event, you can ask people for their preferred contact method or distribute cards with your website and social media tags for them to find you. Be sure to ask what they prefer and provide options for people who do not use the internet or own smartphones. Follow-up outreach may take place via email, recorded voicemails, social media, blog posts, media coverage, or additional events and pop-up outreach.

Regardless of the medium used, follow-up messaging should first thank the participant for choosing to engage with your project. You should also acknowledge the resounding messages that you heard from the public, including the majority opinion, if any, and other notable concerns expressed by the public. You should then explain what actions your agency is taking as a result of the outreach, and which

actions it cannot take and why. Although vociferous advocates may still be angry when their wishes are not granted, they will likely respect your transparency and honesty in explaining why a choice was made and how it meets the needs of the community. Because decision-making can take time, these messages may be spread out over several months but the initial follow-up should take place promptly after the event.

When changes are finally implemented and projects begun, attracting media coverage can help to spread the word to the public about how their time and tax dollars are being spent, while cultivating a positive image for the agency. In future follow-up, you may also want to give participants a chance to join a Citizen's Advisory Board or a survey group that provides regular feedback to the agency about issues of concern.

Public engagement is a challenge and it may take time to find the strategy that works well for your community. While there are different methods of follow-up, the important thing is that your agency recognizes the opportunity to respect those who engage with you and lay groundwork for stronger, more trusting relationships with the public in the future.