

## **Building Unity & Progress through Public Engagement**

**Paul Costello, Executive Director, Vermont Council on Rural Development**

### **TOEC Training Keynote**

**I want to talk about unity and power and how to advance it in rural communities.**

#### **VCRD a State Rural Development Council**

**One of 16 SRDC members of Partners for Rural America**

**VCRD Board and its power: board Sectors and how they work.**

**2002 Farm Bill Charge**

**No Power, no Money: But Discipline and Businesslike Community and  
Policy Dialogue to Decisions**

**Neutrality is Sacred**

**Connection/Hub**

**Summits/Governors Retreats/Conferences**

**2 sides to effort: Community Organizing and Public Policy Convening**

**Community Visit Programs—55 of them—200 projects, more than 10k  
participants, more than 3,000 activated volunteers**

#### **Visiting Teams**

**It's all about local leadership**

**Invitation**

**Decisiveness: Prioritization and Action**

**Spearpoint of Collective Decision Making**

**Power/leadership/unity momentum**

**Border towns/towns "off the map"**

**"it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease"...the town that is ready,**

rallied, with momentum that best accesses non-profit, state and federal programs, technical assistance and grants!

Johnson—bridges, streetscape, water/sewer, affordable housing—

“Communities within the Community” (list them)

Communications Task Force—unifying invitation—“Thursday Night Live”

Legion, arts, downtown assn, school, college,

Quote from Chelsea kid in lunchroom.

**Four Structural Needs for Successful Engagement and one Guiding Thread:**

1. **Defining the role of engagement: what’s your purpose?** Don’t give people the sense that they are making decisions on things they aren’t, but determine in advance what the role of participants is, and what their power of input or decision is. Be clear about it.
  - a. An educational presentation on an issue, policy or decision already made.
  - b. A Hearing about an idea already under consideration.
  - c. A Public input session to start a planning process
  - d. An open public visioning process.
  - e. A public process to contribute ideas for action, prioritize then, and act on them.

If you lack clarity in your invitation process and your announcement of the purpose of the engagement, you will disappoint those who attend, and potentially come in conflict with people who see a different role of the public in decision-making around the topic of the day.

We see a number of initiatives fail when leaders come into a town or a public process to get “input” after they already have fixed ideas and opinions. Really

they are there to convince everyone and “win” be getting folks to follow. The public is rarely deceived.

No one buys an imposed vision. So be clear, up front, on the goals of each meeting or engagement.

Community unity comes when everyone is listened to, where leadership draws all ideas together, when key leaders add things up—and let’s face it, some people are really great natural leaders in doing this; others learn to do it. But when this happens, there is common purpose, collective power, a spearpoint of collective action to common target, and progress is fulfilled. The actors who make it happen are all leaders...because they get things done.

## **2. Invitation Process—who’s in and who is not?**

Let’s think back to the Chelsea and Johnson stories: “Communities in the Community that rarely intersect.”

For each kind of community engagement, you may need to consider a different level of invite—legal posting of Select Board meeting is going to be perfect for regular business.

But when you want to engage the full community, engage dozens or scores of new volunteers, galvanize the town around big choices and build significant momentum, you need to pull out all the stops.

Who owns it? Is this everyone’s conversation?

People need to hear about a community changing engagement six ways to Sunday:

**Front porch forum/Facebook networks**

**Community list serves—and email lists of opinion leaders**  
**Church announcements and bulletins**  
**All local media—radio, community TV, press**  
**School newsletters, letters home**  
**Broadside posters/town banners**  
**Letters to taxpayers**  
**Phone lists**  
**Library and Grocery store handouts**

**I got invited into this in Fairfield where I got a call from a neighbor to say there was an event at the school to envision its future...then action team, school board, and on...**

**Everyone is invited and it's all about you. You are important.**

**Then, how do you reach those who won't come to you?**

**Who comes: educated, better off, more verbal, more hopeful, older. How do you deliberately reach out to youth and to people who may not feel like anyone cares for their opinion?**

**Go to them. Have a session at the school with students.**

**Engage low income community: the Council on the Future of Vermont we went to jail, mobile home parks tenants' associations, schools, senior centers...**

**The civil society we so value in our communities can't be taken for granted. Like democracy itself, it's a process, not an end; one where we vote with our feet, with our organizations, with our courage to take initiative, with our neighborliness – and with our common invitations.**

**3. The Power of Prioritization; What's within your power and what will make the most difference for our town's future?**

**Community priorities, coming from strong civil discourse and inclusion give direction, momentum and an atmosphere of progress. And they engage people as partners at the foundation of enterprise!**

**It's so easy to build two lists for your town: one a list of problems and a second list of good ideas for someone else to act on.**

**Challenges facing Rural Vermont Towns:**

**Broadband Access & Digital economic development/innovation/small tech.**

**Attracting, Retaining, Engaging Youth—providing places they can actualize themselves**

**Opportunity Gaps**

**Education Restructuring**

**Neighborhood safety**

**Successful Communities/Service Towns/Towns losing energy**

**The Affordability Challenge**

**Water and Wastewater infrastructure**

**Seizing Agriculture and Foods Opportunity**

**Public Transportation**

**Sustaining the Forest Products Industry**

**Branding and Marketing your town**

**Derelict Buildings**

**Roads, Bridges and Parking**

**Incubating next gen businesses**

**Strengthening Downtown**

**Developing Local Leadership and Capacity**

**Combating Opiates**

**School board recommendation from our superintendent—“Choose two things to do—if you build a list of 20 problems or 20 things to lead on, you are sunk.”**

**You can't attack all these issues at once...though you may feel like you are supposed to...**

**You need to concentrate community energies to get a couple key areas of momentum a year...you need the public to help lead.**

**4. Discipline! How do we have a strong and effective meeting?**

**Public engagement is not a nicety—it's the serious business of democracy. Done sloppily or ill-organized, it offends or allows the dominance of a fractious fraction of the community, or it becomes a session listing complaints or work beyond everyone's capacity...and all hearts sink!**

**There are basic rules of the road for strong moderation of any community dialogue to be productive:**

- A. Strong Agenda with clear questions for input and times for each section of the discussion.**
- B. Clear and enforced lines between times to talk about challenges or problems and times to propose solutions.**
- C. At the end, A leader who summarizes action and direction from the session. And thanks everyone!**
- D. Strong management**
  - RESPECT and Deep Listening for all points of view**
  - Everyone is important**

- No one speaks without being recognized**
- No one interrupts**
- No one dominates the conversation (and occasionally people are deliberately but politely stopped from taking the air out of the room)**
- All conversation is on topic**
- No one gets to give speeches—time restrictions**
- All get to speak before the biggest voices repeat**

**No one wants a Kumbaya session. No one wants mis-directed time wasting. Smart people will not return to a direction-less or poorly managed dialogue.**

#### **5. Vision: What unites and inspires us?**

**“Unity is vision: it must have been part of the process of learning to see.”**

**Henry Adams**

**Nobody buys an imposed vision.**

**You can use way too much time to perfect one: in one session ask folks points of vision, in next session vote for what’s in and what’s out!**

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**Why do we even do it? So many people don’t vote or attend town meeting. Do we blame folks, or do we get complacent? How do we contribute to passivity, vs. how do we engage everyone in the mutual leadership that is the ideal of civility in a democratic society?**

**We need to stand together and make democracy real.**

**Lincoln called democracy an experiment tested in each generation—if we don’t make it real here...it fails. This is the center of world democracy tonight!**

**I know it sounds vainglorious and even pompous, but as elected local officials we need to be evangelists for hope, for confidence in our community, and for unity.**

**We always say: “There is a power, right here, right now, to drive for the best future of the wonderful, rich and character-filled place that is rural Vermont!”**

**And I say it to you.**

**So proud to be here with you all who do so much in patriotism for your towns and for the state...thanks for the opportunity.**

**In these challenging times, I’ll leave you with the words of Ernest Shackleton who said, “Optimism is the true moral courage!”**