

# EVOLVING THE COMPETITIVE EDGE: RURAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Ryan Lipcsei<sup>1</sup>  
Brittany Bruce<sup>2</sup>  
Dr. Tara Vinodrai<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Environment, Enterprise and Development, University of Waterloo

<sup>2</sup> Department of Geography and Environmental Management, University of Waterloo

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## INTRODUCTION

From February 10-12, 2015, the Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO) hosted their annual conference at the Hamilton Convention Centre. Building on the success of a session on rural economic development held in the previous year, the organizers in collaboration with the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) held a session entitled "*Rural & Small Communities – Evolving the Competitive Edge: Rural Community Engagement.*"

The session was designed to facilitate sharing about how to deepen levels of community engagement in economic development activities. Participants had the opportunity to join roundtable discussions to share success stories, resources and tools; discuss barriers to engagement; and to brainstorm solutions. This report provides an overview of the session and offer a synthesis of the key findings and outcomes produced through the discussion.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Lisa Attygalle, Director of Engagement from the Tamarack Institute kicked off the session with a lively discussion of community engagement and how we should (and should not) do it. Attygalle argued that community engagement is successful only when we are equipped with good information. And, good information draws upon our collective wisdom. Using the metaphor of a scallop, she explained the importance of collective wisdom. A scallop has eyes that cover all 360 degrees of its surroundings and it benefits from bringing all of these perspectives together. Of course, she noted, when it comes to community engagement, the vision of the scallop is aspirational; the reality is that community engagement often involves the same ten people in the community. This is problematic. These ten people do not necessarily represent the community as a whole nor do these ten people represent a diverse set of viewpoints. Essentially, it is the group of people who happen to be available at 2pm, Attygalle quipped.

However, Attygalle warned, this is only part of the reason that economic developers and other community builders access sub-optimal information when doing community engagement. Another reason relates to the venues we choose (e.g. council meetings) and the nature of the formal announcements we make. Imagine, she noted, if Nike approached its product announcements in the same manner that public meetings are announced. Practitioners involved in community engagement should take a cue from the well-established fields of advertising and marketing. In short; we should ask ourselves, what would Don Draper do?

In the world of marketing and advertising, knowing your target market is critical for success. Certainly, when doing community engagement, we need to know our audience. Understanding who is in the crowd is a critical first step to gathering meaningful input. Moreover, in the case of community engagement, that audience is a group of individuals with some shared perspectives and some different interests.

Attygalle invoked a series of rules to communicate with and maintain your audience when engaging with communities.

1. **The 7 second rule** – You have seven seconds to grab the attention of your audience;
2. **The 7 minute rule** – Your audience has about seven minutes of their time to give to you;
3. **The 7 bit rule** – Your audience will likely remember only seven pieces of information. They will be best remembered if they are grouped together in meaningful ways;

She emphasized the power of visuals to enhance the experience for the audience, as well as to get and keep their interest. For example, the recent 'Feeling Congested' campaign by the City of Toronto offered a more visually appealing and effective way of engaging with transit users on the issue of public transportation. Similarly, the 'Meet Jean Bosco' campaign by charity: water personalized stories about water access and harnessed social media to raise funds in a unique and powerful way reaching more than six million people. Attygalle emphasized that it was critical to harness your audience's emotions since an emotional engagement is more likely to remain in your audience's long term memory.

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THEORY: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM

Building on this discussion, Attygalle introduced a framework for understanding and thinking about community engagement (Figure 2, next page). The Community Engagement Continuum identifies five stages that represent different levels and modes of engagement with the community, ranging from passive to active; from broadcasting to interactive; and from being easier to do online to being easier to do in-person. These five stages are described below:

- **Inform** - Informing is passive and involves a one-way flow of information;
- **Consult** - Consulting is reactive. Information is shared and stakeholders are asked to react to it;
- **Involve** - Involving allows the community to influence priorities. You present the problem and the community comes up with solutions to fix it;
- **Collaborate** - Collaborating means that the community is a partner from the beginning. Together you decide upon the key issues, and how best to tackle them;
- **Empower** - Empowering means leadership comes from the community while your organization and others support them.

Attygalle noted that while it was desirable to move towards collaboration and empowerment, the informing, consulting, and involving are equally important and necessary to create authentic community engagement experiences.

## GETTING TO ENGAGEMENT

After describing the Community Engagement Continuum, Attygalle argued that doing informing, consulting and involving together leads to strong and authentic community engagement (Figure 1). She went on to offer tips for practitioners to help them succeed in these community engagement activities; these tips are summarized below:

### TIPS FOR INFORMING

- **Tell a story:** Entice your audience and hold their attention by appealing to their emotions through storytelling.
- **Educate your audience:** Use visuals and animate your data through the use of infographics and other compelling visualizations.
- **The 1/3 Rule:** On social media, your content should be divided roughly into thirds: one third should be about yourself (or your organization), one third should be about other people/organizations, and one third should be about leveraging your 'database' (or network) to collect information.

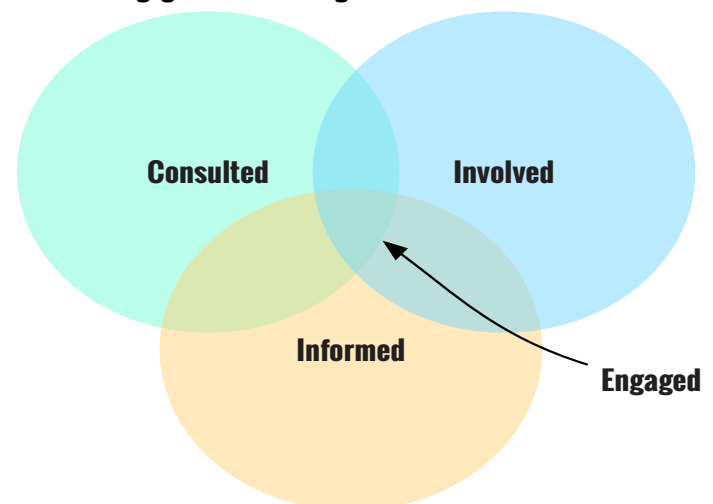
### TIPS FOR CONSULTING

- **Consulting is listening:** If you are requesting feedback, actually listen.
- **Feed it back to stakeholders through informing:** Utilize feedback to create new 'inform' opportunities.
- **Bridge online and in-person (off-line) methods of communication:** Remember that different stakeholders access and interact with information in different ways.

### TIPS FOR INVOLVING

- **Invite stakeholders to the table early:** Elicit feedback from stakeholders to identify and refine issues.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** Give your audience opportunities to provide input.
- **Understand that feedback is cyclical:** The information that stakeholders provide to you can inform the next round of engagement activities.

FIGURE 1: Engagement Venn Diagram



ADAPTED FROM: Attygalle, Lisa. (2015). *Community Engagement*. Presented at EDCO 2015 Annual Conference, Hamilton, Ontario.

# THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM

FIGURE 2: The Community Engagement Continuum



SOURCE: International Association of Public Participation. (2007). Available online.

# DOING RURAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: GROUP DISCUSSION

Based on the insights provided by Lisa Attygalle, session participants were invited to contribute their perspectives and experiences through facilitated small group discussions. These discussions were led by the session organizers and students and researchers affiliated with the University of Waterloo's Local Economic Development (LED) graduate program.

The goal of the discussion was to reflect on how the participants' organizations engage with their communities and encourage participants to share success stories, challenges, and tools and resources to assist in the community engagement process.

The discussion questions included:

1. How does your organization currently engage your community and where do you currently fall on the Community Engagement Continuum?
  - a. Who are you currently engaging in this process? Who is missing?
  - b. Why should you be engaging with the community?
  - c. What does success look like to you/your organization?
2. Are there organizations in your community demonstrating exceptional leadership in community engagement? What are the success stories and what does success look like?
3. What are some of the barriers/factors your community faces to engaging the community and how can they be overcome?
4. What resources/tools are you familiar with that would assist your colleagues in more effective community engagement?

There were 8 groups, including representation from economic development organizations, consulting companies and all levels of government. Tables 1 and 2 provides a summary of some of the key characteristics of the participant organizations. The participants involved in the session represented organizations from across Ontario, the province and nationally. The majority of organizations represented in the roundtable discussions were municipal governments, followed by economic development corporations.

**TABLE 1: Geographic Coverage of Session Participant's Organizations**

Nationwide	1
Provincial	5
Northern Ontario	2
Southwestern Ontario	21
Eastern Ontario	5
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>34</b>

**SOURCE:** Authors' estimates

**TABLE 2: Types of Organizations**

Consulting Firms	2
Provincial Government	4
Provincial Organizations	1
Municipal Governments	18
Economic Development Corporations	8
Chambers of Commerce	1
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>34</b>

**SOURCE:** Authors' estimates

# DOING RURAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: KEY DISCUSSION THEMES

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Each table of participants discussed the questions in relation to their own community's experiences. Overall, session participants viewed public participation as important in their communities. All of the session participants indicated that their organizations have been involved in some level of public engagement within their communities. Not surprisingly, the level of public engagement varied due to a number of factors including how the engagement process was structured and organized, and the level of public interest or investment in a particular issue. Through the roundtable discussions, a number of common themes emerged; these are discussed below.

## USING MULTIPLE CHANNELS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Participants spoke at length about the importance of collecting feedback from, and communicating with, the community via multiple channels. For every mention advocating for the use of social media, there was an equal voice saying traditional methods were still equally important, especially in rural areas. Whether citing the demographic composition of rural Ontario, or noting the specific agreements that many municipalities have with local media outlets, the participants emphasized that the mechanisms for outreach and engagement have *expanded* rather than changed. In other words, social media and other technologies act as a complement to rather than a replacement for traditional outreach and engagement techniques. Those who were well-versed in using multiple portals for engagement understood that each resident's way of receiving community information is different. Overall, the session discussions underscored the importance of using several different mediums or techniques for engagement, in hopes of maximizing the number of citizens reached.

## LEADERSHIP

Having one or multiple champions for a project was seen as vital to success. Discussions around leadership identified both the importance of leadership from within the organization and/or in the political sphere, as well as the importance of leadership from the public. Certainly, a number of conversations focused on the benefits of having buy-in from the community's mayor or CAO, as well as having these political leaders visibly involved in the engagement process. First, this helps dispel the common perception that politicians may withhold information. With representatives from 'city hall' available to answer inquiries, engagement attempts are often viewed as being more sincere, open and transparent. Second, local officials are able to set clear objectives and goals to help guide public participation and engagement. With the right political and staff involvement, public outreach can remain on track, and on budget. Furthermore, having the appropriate local officials involved allows for transparency and clarity about

costs. Residents may be unsure, or unaware of the real costs of services or infrastructure; therefore, clarifying what is feasible and why, was viewed as a necessity for success.

An equally important discussion revolved around leadership from the local community, and the benefits of utilizing local social capital. Participants identified many instances where civic involvement was critical to the success of a project. Citizens may be passionate about certain tasks or issues, and allowing them to take on such roles not only increases the level of public impact, but frees up local staff to take on other projects. The idea of civic leadership reinforces the elements of the Community Engagement Continuum focused on involving, collaborating and empowering.

## FEEDBACK AND FOLLOW-THROUGH

Echoing Lisa Attygalle's points on what it takes for successful community engagement, session participants talked about the need for feedback and follow-through. The public wants to know that their voices mean something and that the time they have invested has made a difference and has had an impact. Participants should know what stage of the planning process they are stepping into so they can provide appropriate input. This also helps to manage expectations around how much the community can affect the outcome. Session participants also emphasized the importance of reaching out after public engagement sessions. This is not only a courtesy to say thank you for participating, but can also serve to communicate the resulting changes and impacts.

## SCALE MATTERS

The last, and perhaps the least expected, theme arising from the session focuses on the scale at which public engagement efforts are organized. While it might be tempting to simply have one meeting or one survey covering all aspects of a particular issue, the session discussions indicated that this is not how successful public engagement occurs. For example, instead of hosting a meeting aimed at creating a strategic plan with input from the public, having separate meetings focusing on specific issues may generate more meaningful insights. In any community, there will be people who are more interested in certain topics, but not others. Offering smaller-scale, focused opportunities to engage, not only gives residents more direct contact with the people in charge of the issue they are interested in, but also allows the number to remain manageable at each meeting to ensure all voices are heard. Deeper levels of engagement require the use of targeted, smaller scale events, surveys, and meetings to achieve success.



# DOING RURAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

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Throughout the roundtable discussion, participants identified a series of barriers and challenges to achieving meaningful community engagement in rural areas. These barriers fall into two categories: 1) the barriers faced when initially seeking public input; and 2) the challenges faced after consultation, but before action or implementation can occur.

## CONSULTATION PHASE

### POLITICAL WILL

Session participants emphasized the difficulty that many municipal and regional economic developers face in getting elected officials involved in community engagement. Public officials may see the attempt as foolhardy and may feel that, since they are elected, they already speak for their constituents. This view was most prevalent in communities where elected officials have been in office for a long time.

### OLD VOICES, NEW VOICES

Similarly, there is the challenge of balancing the desires and viewpoints of long-term residents with those who are relatively new, even in instances where newer residents had been in the community for several years. In some rural communities, residents without deep local roots were viewed as outsiders. In communities considered 'bedroom communities', session participants suggested that the level of interest amongst residents was diminished because of the lack of a personal connection with their place of residence. Finally, the roundtable discussions highlighted the tension that exists in rural communities where there is a need to balance the perspectives of seasonal residents (e.g. cottagers, etc.) with those of year-round residents.

### MEETING LOGISTICS

Session participants emphasized the difficulty in identifying both ideal times and locations for community engagement activities. In rural areas, transit was seen as a barrier to participation. In many cases, community engagement meetings or feedback sessions are held at a town hall or a community centre. Without a well-developed transit network, people who want to participate may be unable to do so. Similarly, identifying a time that does not conflict with family, religious or other obligations may be difficult.

## POST-CONSULTATION PHASE

### TURNING FEEDBACK INTO ACTION

The group discussions revealed that even after productive meetings, barriers were often present when trying to translate the community's feedback into action. Asking the public open ended questions is fraught with the challenge of analyzing the data in hopes of coming up with something

concrete. The public can be unaware of the real costs of their proposals, and as such the issue may go unresolved until the municipality finds a way to fund a solution, or regulatory barriers have been addressed.

### MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Session participants suggested that managing expectations was critical. Participants identified several instances where community input and feedback had been collected and used to make changes to the project, only for those changes to be overturned at later stages. In some cases, this was because of financial considerations. In other cases, it was due to zoning restrictions, by-laws or other regulatory barriers. In other cases still, it was due to the decision-making power being held by other politicians and stakeholders. Session participants agreed that it was important to be clear with the community regarding how their feedback is to be used. Moreover, it is important to build consensus amongst other stakeholders about how community input will be fed into a project, so that everyone is on the same page.

Furthermore, empowering civic and community leaders to lead change can only be successful if they have the capacity and resources to make a difference. Giving decision making power to community groups can be detrimental if they are not equipped or prepared to take on this responsibility. This may require financial resources, or other interventions to help build capacity, such as allowing time for community groups to build support amongst local residents or accessing particular skills or expertise.

### RISK AVERSION

Risk aversion was identified as a barrier both for the municipality/organization and the public. From the municipal/organizational perspective, public participation may be viewed as being too time consuming and costly, and may only result in unrealistic hopes and expectations from the public. From the public's perspective, citizens may be disinterested in participation if previous community engagement attempts resulted in little or no action or change. Both of these scenarios make the interested parties risk averse to wanting to attempt, or participate in, community engagement.

# DOING RURAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: SUCCESS STORIES

## DEFINING SUCCESS

Beyond the themes present in the roundtable discussions, session participants spent time discussing and defining success and sharing a number of compelling success stories. Successful engagement with the local community can mean several things. Does success mean more residents are involved than previous attempts at engagement? Can an implemented initiative be deemed successful if it only benefits a certain demographic or area within the municipality? The common message in the roundtable discussions was that any single attempt at community engagement does not have to hit every check box to be successful. As long as the message was sincere, and participants felt it was worth their time, the engagement could be considered successful.

## DIVERSE SUCCESS STORIES

Successful examples of community engagement came from all over Ontario, across communities of different sizes, and at different geographic scales. The First Nations reserve of Serpent River, a community of approximately 300 people, has put engagement tools on their website, allowing both those on-and-off reserve to stay informed via social media, and have input into local projects. In a larger municipality, the London Plan was created after having municipally-led community meetings focused on key issues, that had been determined by residents through consultation sessions. At the regional level, the Northern Growth Plan has allowed various groups from across northern Ontario to access funding for community projects. There were many success stories that participants were willing to speak about, however, not all of these success stories could be included here. To this end, success stories from two very different communities are presented here. Although these examples are successful at different scales, located in different parts of the province and differ in structure (municipal-led vs. grassroots), each project involved the community to achieve their goals and has led to improvements within the community.

### DOWNTOWN BEAUTIFICATION

Alvinston, Ontario (with a population of approximately 1,000) is part of the Municipality of Brooke-Alvinston, Lambton County in southwestern Ontario. In 2007, a small, local grassroots group (the Alvinston Community Group) was formed through the efforts of a new resident, who was joined by a number of lifelong residents with a common goal of bringing pride back to Alvinston, where a number of downtown stores had closed over the years. After holding town meetings to engage other residents, the group received assistance from the local Optimist Club and held fund raising events of their own. The funds assisted with a number of small-scale projects, including hanging flower baskets in the downtown area, painting vacant storefronts, building a gazebo, park benches, and swings in a new park area (formerly a vacant downtown lot), and creating a skateboard park for local youth. In 2013, the group was named amongst the recipients of the June Callwood Outstanding Achievement Award for Voluntarism by the Ontario government. More importantly, they have generated visible and tangible results that have improved the community.

### PHYSICIAN RETENTION

In the city of Belleville (with a population of approximately 49,500), successful community engagement has led to the implementation of a physician retention strategy. A BR+E exercise by the City of Belleville led the municipality to learn that a common concern amongst local businesses was a physician shortage in the community. In the view of local business, the physician shortage was making it difficult to both attract new businesses and retain existing businesses. In response to this issue, the City of Belleville engaged local business people and residents to develop a community ambassador program that welcomes new physicians and conveys a positive sense of place. This community-based recruitment initiative was complimented by Belleville establishing a new multi-physician clinic, which has attracted many physicians and been successful in addressing the shortage.

#### NOTE:

The examples of successful community engagement at the local level are based on the authors' interpretations of the session discussions and notes. Given the nature of the session, verbatim, transcribed conversations were not possible. However, each recorder took note of their table's discussion to the best of their ability. Thus, the authors' interpretations may be partial or incomplete and represent only one perspective of the communities in question.





# TOOLS AND RESOURCES: DOING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Through the group discussions, the participants identified a series of tools, techniques and resources for practitioners to use to improve community engagement. These are summarized below.

## 1. GENERAL APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT

Session participants emphasized that in the pursuit of community engagement, create a dialogue among stakeholders, utilize problem-solving techniques and be respectful of people's time. The use of issue-based committees can help increase the number of people that are engaged (as not everyone will be interested in the same issue). If you are the lead organization, develop a reputation for following up, and acknowledge feedback and support. Capture a diversity of perspectives and be sure to engage beyond 'the usual suspects' so as to avoid having the same people at the table as this can stifle community engagement.

## 2. SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media tools, like Twitter, Facebook and blogs, were identified as key ways to interface with the community, if informing and consulting are your primary engagement goals. Doodle polls and surveys are also tools that can be used to consult with stakeholders.

## 3. INCENTIVE BASED STRATEGIES + GIMMICKS

Incentive based strategies and gimmicks can be used to elicit engagement by making it worthwhile for your stakeholders. Examples of these kinds of tools include;

- Having a Speakers Corner in local schools to better engage youth in community issues;
- Running a "Can we buy you a coffee?" campaign; The campaign is a commitment to speak with your organization for only as long as it takes to drink the coffee;
- 'Speed Dating' nights that involve spending a predetermined amount of time talking with business owners, hearing their concerns and offering advice; and
- Role Playing: allowing citizens to divide money among different community needs.

These kinds of activities can make the process of engagement fun and make follow through easier as relationships have been formed in a more casual way.

## 4. EVENTS AND TRADE FAIRS

Events and fairs can inform, consult or even involve

stakeholders; especially if an event has workshop style sessions that can impact community outcomes. As a governmental organization or department, it may make sense to organize fairs or events around different sectors or industries since the attendees will vary depending on the topic. To cultivate relationships with local actors in key industries, government staff members could also join local industry or trade associations as a way to identify and meet local employers.

## 5. ON-LINE ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

A number of participants mentioned several online tools that have been useful to them in their pursuit of community engagement. These are as follows:

- **PlaceSpeak** [www.placespeak.com](http://www.placespeak.com): a location based community consultation platform;
- **PowerNoodle** [www.powernoodle.com](http://www.powernoodle.com): a cloud-based platform that helps organizations make better decisions and solve problems fast; it also helps overcome traditional decision making challenges such as personality differences;
- **Gamestorming** [www.gamestorming.com](http://www.gamestorming.com): set of best practices on co-creation tools compiled from all over the world into a toolkit that can be used by your business; combination of game principles, game mechanics and work; it is built on the Silicon Valley model.

Participants noted challenges in using or taking advantage of these resources, including a lack of willingness to use these tools and a lack of resources (human capital, skills, financial). In other words, many of the barriers to effective community engagement identified above, are also barriers to taking advantage of and using these resources.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

As noted earlier, it is important to remember that these methods are not meant to be used in isolation. A combination of these tools is likely required in order to engage people on their own time, and in a convenient way. A variety of approaches is also critical as people receive and process information in different ways. While technology is an important resource, do not forget the importance of face-to-face communication. Participants agreed that face-to-face community engagement can help you to identify committed individuals and community leaders in your area, as well as help you and your organization gain credibility and trustworthiness within the community.

# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

## FACILITATING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is widely accepted as critical for the success of economic development initiatives. Yet, there are often substantial obstacles and barriers to achieving success. How can we achieve high quality community engagement? And, what tactics can we use to overcome these obstacles and barriers?

Lisa Attygalle inspired economic developers to consider how we do community engagement. Certainly, there is room to ignite communities to take action. However, we must provide the right spaces for that to happen and ensure that we provide authentic and meaningful engagement experiences that lead to tangible outcomes. Attygalle's introduction to the Community Engagement Continuum provided a framework for session participants to reflect on their own experiences with the community engagement process. Despite the diversity of participants, the structured roundtable discussions revealed several key take-aways:

**Use multiple channels for engagement** to capture a diversity of perspectives and reach all corners of your community;

**Provide feedback and follow through** to ensure that the community sees concrete results and knows that their input has made a difference;

**Leadership** from municipal organizations and the public is critical for project success;

**Smaller scale efforts can often achieve greater results** since citizens or key stakeholders may only have an interest in certain aspects of a project; this may also lead to stronger engagement.

The roundtable discussions also revealed barriers to successful community engagement, some of which are quite acute within rural communities. Challenges can be found during the initial consultation phase, as well as in subsequent phases as a project or initiative moves towards implementation. Gaining traction from the outset can prove difficult if there is little political will. Tensions may exist between newcomers, seasonal residents and established residents and reconciling the views of these different groups might prove difficult. Rural communities need to be aware of the logistics associated with organizing community engagement sessions, particularly given the often geographically dispersed nature of their constituencies.

After the initial consultation, municipal leaders may struggle with turning feedback into action. It may be necessary to manage public expectations about what is possible within financial and regulatory constraints. Moreover, municipal leaders and community members may be risk averse to participating in community engagement efforts.

Finally, session participants offered resources and different 'tricks of the trade' utilized by economic developers when seeking public participation. Many of these resources and practices reflect the themes identified above, such as approaching engagement through issue-based committees and harnessing social media tools. Other tools used included 'speed dating with business' nights, industry-specific events and workshops, and youth-oriented Speakers Corner booths.

Overall, it was clear from just one 90-minute session, that there is immense passion amongst economic development practitioners to engage with their communities and learn from one another.

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