

# Strategies for Reconnecting Citizens and Government

## Introduction

In recent years, local government work has been handicapped by declining citizen confidence and involvement in government. Opinion polls and a growing docket of initiatives signal that citizens do not feel that government officials listen to them, or that citizens have significant influence on community decisions. Polls also indicate that the average citizen is acutely aware of government shortcomings, but far less conscious of the benefits government provides. The day-to-day services of local government are all too invisible to the naked eye, until things go awry. "The record of American government successes may well qualify as the greatest story never told," according to political columnist, Mark Shields.

Government may be guilty as charged on some counts, and certainly government must change to meet the demands of dramatically changing times. But it is misguided to view government as if it is some foreign, occupying power. Citizens established local governments to address their shared interests and needs. (Remember government of, for, and by the people?) Citizens share a responsibility for how local governments perform, and local officials must seek ways to re-engage citizens in shaping their communities.

There are small signs that we have begun to turn the corner and are moving toward improved confidence in government. However, given the pervasiveness of negative perceptions, action is needed. Government officials are finding that they need new tools for better gauging and understanding the preferences and needs of constituents in increasingly diverse communities. Better tools are needed, too, for re-engaging citizens in the dialog about community direction and improvement.

In addition, cities and counties need to better communicate about the value of government. They must spread the word about government successes, without whitewashing the problems that must be addressed. Finally, local governments must honestly look at what changes are needed to reconnect citizens with government and to make government work in the new information age.

## Evidence of a Problem

Recent opinion polls paint a grim picture of citizen understanding and trust in government. One such survey found that two-thirds of the people surveyed could not name their representative in Congress and that most respondents were misinformed about how the federal (or local) budgets were spent. Numerous polls conducted nationally and in Washington State indicate that trust in government has eroded significantly, and that most respondents feel they don't "have a real say" in what government does.

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A national survey conducted by Hart/Teeter for the Council for Excellence in Government found that 9 out of 10 respondents could readily cite examples of the “biggest problems” with government, while 42 percent could not name any successes. However, when asked about the value of specific government programs, large majorities judged many of them to be successful and worthwhile. Reminding respondents about specific government programs apparently elicited a more positive response toward government. Surveys of Washington State citizens show similar results and trends. (Examples of these and other polls may be viewed on MRSC’s Web site).

A number of studies suggest a parallel decline in the level of participation in civic, religious, and other voluntary associations. Researcher Robert Putnam stirred considerable interest with a study that observed, symbolically, that more people are bowling than ever before, but they are bowling alone—no longer in teams. According to his studies, participation in many community organizations, service clubs, and church-related activities has dropped significantly since the 1960’s. These declines are a concern because such organizations have functioned as training grounds for future leaders and to build skills and habits of cooperating for mutual benefit.

### **Roots of the Problem**

Citizen discontent is, in part, a reflection of the failure of local governments to stay sufficiently in touch with citizens. As the population and government agencies grow in size, representatives in government begin to seem less accessible, less accountable, and less in tune with the needs of the diverse groups they represent. Government delivery of services by larger agencies may seem faceless. Government regulations and permit processes tend to become more complex with growth. Negative campaigning, misleading ads, and broken promises have further eroded confidence in elected officials. Campaign financing practices lead citizens to suspect that special interest groups and those with money control public policy decisions rather than Joe Citizen.

However, government may also be blamed for societal trends and evolutionary changes that government did not create. Changing demographics and family relationships, global competition, and an impersonal technology revolution have triggered anxieties about job loss, isolation, and other social ills. These fears may get redirected toward government agencies that don’t seem to be doing enough to cushion Jane Citizen from a very bumpy road as we transition into the information age.

A number of trends leave citizens with less time and opportunity to put down roots in their community or to participate in community affairs. An increased share of households are single parent or childless households or households with two wage earners. People are moving more often to the suburbs, or in pursuit of jobs, affordable housing, and more pleasing environment. People also are commuting farther. Many newer residential areas, including some gated communities, seem to be designed more to “protect people from community” rather than to connect them to it. Studies indicate that TV viewing is consuming increasing amounts of our leisure time, in place of more interactive pursuits.

Economic trends, such as global competition, corporate consolidation, down-sizing, and the technology revolution are disorienting. They also have created job instability, especially for those who lack technology skills required for new jobs. Meanwhile, welfare reform, regulatory reform, and decreased federal and state funding have punched holes in safety net programs.

The Internet and other communication innovations transmit what Mindy Cameron, former Seattle Times editor, terms a “babble of information” that doesn’t distinguish between well-researched information and opinion not based on fact. New communications tools can contribute both to information overload and the rapid spread of misinformation.

## **Government Exists for a Reason and Offers Real Value**

To regain citizen trust, government officials should work with citizens to recall why we created government in the first place and what benefits it provides us. As former Seattle Mayor Norm Rice eloquently explains, “We come together as people to form government because together we can accomplish goals we cannot accomplish alone. Unless we join together, we have no hope of protecting our quality of life or our individual freedoms.” Many expensive and extensive services and networks, such as roads, sewers, public safety, or a social safety net, cannot be accomplished if we proceed as individuals, pursuing only our own interests.

As Dan Kaline, a Missouri planner further observes, “A community requires that its members accept limits on personal choice for the common good.” In other words, civilized people living together in communities must agree to certain ground rules in order to live together in peace and harmony. The “tragedy of the commons” parable provides a particularly clear illustration of this point. In this tale, a pasture exists which is open to all to use. Each herdsman, in pursuit of his own interests, can be expected to graze as many cattle as possible on the common area pasture. As a rational being, each herdsman will want to continue to add cattle to his herd to maximize his gain when selling the cattle. For some years, the pasture may continue to support the separate herds. At some point in time, as the number of cattle grows, the land will become overgrazed and will be able to support fewer and fewer cattle. Eventually, even the original number can no longer be supported. The moral of the story is that complete freedom in a commons brings ruin to all. Unless the herdsman cooperate and agree to limits, the mutual benefits they receive from the commons will be diminished or lost altogether.

Local government and our political process provide the means to sort out competing interests and diverse needs that exist within a community. The political process and public dialogue can lead to compromises and solutions that may be more equitable to diverse groups in a community. As noted in an article in the Seattle Municipal League’s *Issue Watch*, “politics should not be a grubby confrontation of competing interests but an arena in which citizens learn from each other and develop an enlightened self-interest in common.”

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Existing government regulations and services generally evolved in response to real needs. For instance, we adopted environmental protections in response to instances of flood damage, declining water quality, and other undesirable effects that we agreed were problems. Sewer systems and garbage disposal programs were set up to address community-recognized needs. From time to time, local governments and their citizens will need to re-evaluate whether these needs still exist or whether a better approach to the problem can be adopted. Yet, we need to recall the events and needs that led to the adoption of such programs before too quickly discarding them.

## **Strategies for Reconnecting Citizens and Government**

The citizens of a community have a mutual responsibility for that community’s future. Local officials should focus on how to draw people into caring about their community and recognizing their common goals. They should help citizens to understand the connection between individual self-interest and what is good for the community as a whole. Citizens will be more inclined to become involved if they believe that their efforts will make a difference and will serve their long-term interests. The best-supported government policies result from collaborative efforts among government, citizens, stakeholders, and the civic and religious organizations that are the moral anchors of our communities. As former Seattle Mayor Norm Rice observes, we need “to build partnerships, not draw lines in the sand.” As Beverly Stein, Multnomah County (Oregon) Board Chair stresses, “It is not enough to ask whether government is providing good service. Instead, we must ask ourselves whether government is advancing democracy by serving as a catalyst to bring resources, people, and plans together to accomplish our common goals.”

Local jurisdictions need communication tools for a variety of situations and purposes. Local governments continually need communication tools they can use to keep citizens informed about community issues and services and also for better communicating what local government is and what it does for its citizens. Other communication approaches are needed to obtain feedback and ideas about citizen concerns and needs. Perhaps most important of all are the approaches that engage citizens in decisions about community direction and improvement.

Cities and counties should consciously develop comprehensive programs for involving citizens and “telling the story” about what local government offers. The best programs will include staff training (for staff from all departments) to assure that daily contacts with citizens are positive. Local governments may further benefit from creating an office or team to ensure a coordinated effort. Local governments can and should make use of techniques from the marketing world but must focus on delivering an honest message. Efforts to manipulate or co-opt citizen support, without addressing priority citizen needs, will only increase distrust in government.

This section offers examples of effective communications/involvement approaches tailored for different communications needs. For more information on these approaches and for other examples, please view MRSC’s “Effective Citizen Communication and Involvement” page at <http://www.mrsc.org>.

## Getting the Word Out

Our communities are increasingly made up of diverse groups with diverse interests and different ways of obtaining information. The most effective community involvement programs use a combination of approaches to reach a cross section of citizens. A rapidly changing world and emerging technology offer new opportunities for quick and cost-effective ways to get out information. Busy schedules mean that citizens will appreciate convenient, comfortable, and quick ways to stay informed about government services and community issues. Citizens may also enjoy combining the responsibility of staying informed with the opportunity for social interaction and even a little fun! Local governments should not forget to keep citizens aware of accomplishments as well as what's going on.

A particularly fine example is Spokane County's highly innovative approach for involving citizens in its comprehensive planning process. "Meeting in a Box" is a self-guided workshop that contains everything needed for individuals, service organizations, or neighborhood groups to host a workshop in a comfortable setting, such as a home. The box contains an instruction manual, a ten-minute video, brochures, maps, an opinion survey, and a newsletter on growth management. Any county resident could reserve a "box" and host a workshop. The opportunity for a more informal meeting environment appealed to a wider range of the public than past approaches. Over 2500 people participated in 100 such meetings on a very modest budget. Other communities have made effective use of open houses, block parties, speakers' bureaus, Web pages (for adults and kids), e-mail notification, cable TV, newsletters, citizen academies, staff training, and other approaches for getting the word out.

## Listening to Citizens

Local government officials are, with few exceptions, committed to serving citizens' interests and providing high-quality, efficient government services. Yet there is much evidence that citizens do not feel they are being heard or that government is addressing their priority needs. A rapidly changing world, coupled with growing and diversifying communities, means that traditional approaches for gathering feedback may be less effective today. Formal public hearings have their place, but they can be intimidating. Such hearings may not be the best way to encourage comment from a wide cross section of community residents and may not fit into citizens' busy schedules. Local governments are trying new approaches to make it easier for citizens to express their opinions and for local officials to understand citizen needs. Opportunities for face-to-face exchanges will facilitate understanding and a balancing of diverse interests. Scheduling convenient times and providing comfortable settings will encourage participation.

Citizens must feel that their concerns have been acknowledged and will be considered, rather than feel they have been manipulated or co-opted. Local officials initially gain legitimacy because citizens of the community have elected them, believing that they will represent their interests. Local officials maintain legitimacy to the extent that they maintain open lines of communication, provide opportunities for citizens with diverse viewpoints to be heard, work with the community to develop a shared vision and goals, and then follow those goals.

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Shelton, Olympia, Maple Valley, Snohomish County, Redmond, and other communities, have used visual preference surveys to better gauge citizens’ preferences about the physical appearance of their communities. Rather than using words, the surveys use pictures to help citizens visualize the choices they have, and to help decision-makers understand what features their citizens value. Slides of contrasting development scenarios and streetscapes also clarify difficult issues, such as whether residents view higher density development favorably with different design treatments. Other communities have improved citizen feedback by using forums, radio call-in shows, walking town meetings, online comment opportunities, small group interviews, citizen surveys, advisory committees, and other approaches.

## **Engaging/Enpowering Citizens**

Much of the focus of local government communications programs is appropriately on keeping citizens informed and consulting with citizens about important issues and needs. Local governments that encourage citizens to become directly involved in community improvements and in setting community direction will reap further rewards. Some jurisdictions are creating programs that encourage shared responsibility for community problem solving and improvement. In addition to harnessing the energy and ideas of citizen groups toward addressing community needs, such programs ideally provide citizens with a sense of ownership in the community. Neighborhood programs and volunteer opportunities are examples of programs that directly involve citizens in community improvement.

A citizen should be viewed as a partner in government rather than a mere customer. Some types of programs may be better served by the “barn-raising” approach where citizens join together to accomplish what they cannot accomplish alone. In this model, they share responsibility for shaping programs that best meet their needs, balanced with the needs of the community as a whole. Citizen involvement is essential for tasks such as developing a vision for the community’s future, choosing strategies for community development, meeting housing and transportation needs, and participating in making communities safe.

Since 1994, Lacey has conducted a highly successful Work Involvement Now (WIN) program. The program recruits youth groups, including scout troops, softball teams, 4-H clubs, school clubs, and others, to tackle community improvement projects. In addition to completing desired community improvements, the program cultivates a sense of civic responsibility and community pride among the participating youth. Communities have used visioning, neighborhood matching grants, and a variety of volunteer programs to engage citizens in community improvement and setting community direction.

## **Communicating about Government Spending**

Tax and budget issues are often the focal points for citizen anger with government. Various polls and initiative actions indicate that citizen anger over taxes may not be primarily about the total amount of the taxes levied (although still an issue). Rather, the main issue may be the feeling that tax dollars are wasted, or are not being spent where citizens would like to see their money spent. Citizens frequently express the feeling

that they have little influence over how their money is spent. Some voice their suspicions that special interests drive local decisions. There is confusion over different levels of government and how the tax dollar is split. There is a lack of understanding about the connection between the tax dollars government collects and the services that it provides. Budget documents are often lengthy and obtuse. More focused and understandable messages about budget decisions and tax dollar spending are urgently needed.

Port Angeles used a very effective comparison to communicate the good deal that citizens receive for their tax dollar. The following is a condensed version of a table showing the monthly cost of city services (per homeowner) compared with the cost of other potential private purchases, excerpted from a city newsletter:

Service Provided	Cost Per Month	Comparison	Cost
Police services	6.93	Dinner for two	25.00
Park and recreation	4.09	Disposable diapers	24.99
Fire and Medic One	3.99	Two movie tickets, popcorn, drinks	21.00
Street services	3.50	Twelve pack beer	7.28
General government	2.61	Bottle of wine	8.00
Planning and engineering	1.45	Paper towels (six rolls)	4.49
Finance	.64	Video rental	2.99
Debt service	6.37	Latte	1.75

Other communities have effectively used budgets-in-brief, citizen capital improvements committees, and tax mailers to help citizens understand and provide informed comment on complex budget issues.

## Communicating about the Services and Value that Government Provides

Most local governments have been far too modest about the day-to-day services they provide. Local governments generally need to expand efforts to get the word out about the variety of services available to citizens, and to do so in language that emphasizes how these services respond to their citizens' needs and interests. Much of the contact that citizens have with their government is related to the services provided. Government's responsiveness to citizens' service needs will greatly shape citizens' perception about the value of their local government.

Many publications on reinventing government advocate that government agencies place increased emphasis on responsive customer service. In the delivery of services, such as water service or garbage pick-up, government appropriately acts in the role of a business providing services to a customer. For these transactions, citizens should expect courtesy, promptness, efficiency, and quality. A citizen's view of government is shaped by interactions with individuals in government. However, unlike many private sector transactions, government transactions, such as the issuance of a

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development permit, can affect many people other than just the “customer.” The “business” of government must be conducted in a way that considers the broader interests of the community.

Walla Walla alerts citizens to an extensive offering of public services with its appropriately titled guide, “City Hall: What’s in it for You?” Shoreline provides citizens with a similar guide, “Owner’s Manual: Your Guide to Services and Citizen Participation in the City of Shoreline.” Other cities offer online citizen assistance and service request forms, ombudsman, information centers, and other approaches to heighten citizen awareness and positive experience concerning city services.

## Conclusion

Many Washington communities have taken innovative and evolutionary steps toward improving citizen awareness, better gauging citizen preferences and needs, and engaging citizens in new ways. These efforts will increase recognition of the mutual responsibility we share to make government work for us all. When citizens feel themselves to be partners in government, they will have restored confidence in their government. Local government can and should serve as a catalyst to bring resources, people, and plans together to accomplish common goals.

Examples of such efforts are available on MRSC’s Web site at [www.mrsc.org/](http://www.mrsc.org/)... Additional examples are presented in the MRSC publication, “Governments are from Saturn...Citizens are from Jupiter: Strategies for Reconnecting Citizens and Government,” available on MRSC’s Web site or in published form. These examples offer the opportunity to learn from one another about new ways to make local government work for all of us in a new age.

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