

Community Heart & Soul™

— Guided by What Matters Most —

RESOURCE



For Heart & Soul Process Phase



Encouraging Inclusive, Open Government



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WHAT WE BELIEVE

The Orton Family Foundation's mission is to empower people to shape the future of their communities by improving local decision-making, creating a shared sense of belonging, and ultimately strengthening the social, cultural, and economic vibrancy of each place.

We do this by assisting the residents of small cities and towns in the use of the Heart & Soul method, a barn-raising approach to community planning and development designed to increase participation in local decision

making and empower residents to shape the future of their communities in a way that upholds the unique character of each place.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Orton Family Foundation is a small family operating foundation that invests in practices that enhance the ability of citizens to participate in local decision-making. Our initiative, Community Heart & Soul™. Guided by What Matters Most, is a new approach to community planning and development.

The Foundation wishes to thank the many individuals, local elected and appointed officials, community volunteers, and like-minded practitioners, non-profits, foundations and business and trade organizations that have contributed in countless ways to our development of the Community Heart & Soul approach.

A special thank you to the residents, volunteers, and leaders in our partner Community Heart & Soul towns who learn with us, on the ground, to evolve the Heart & Soul method presented in this Guide. We could not possibly have done it without all of you, a community of inventive, determined people.

Finally, our deep gratitude to Lyman Orton—founder, board chair and funder of the Orton Family Foundation—for his generosity, passion and guidance. Community Heart & Soul would be a dream, not a growing reality, without his persistent belief in the regular folks who live and work in America's small towns.

Learn more about Heart & Soul at orton.org/heart-soul

A community with Heart & Soul encourages inclusive, open government.

What does it mean?

Inclusive, open governments are ones that encourage community members to fully understand and participate in governance and decision making. To accomplish this, they work to build and maintain strong relationships with community members, communicate and share information regularly, and reach out to citizens whose voices are not normally heard. Open govern-

ments promote transparent procedures so that residents know how things work, what to expect, and when to weigh in. Inclusive, open governments know that trust and transparency makes them more effective, and that engaging residents and tapping into local wisdom expands their capacity to solve problems and get things done.

What does this matter?

As community challenges become more complex, as public budgets become smaller, and as public trust and good will for government become less generous, local governments are learning that a cooperative, transparent approach is more effective and efficient than an executive, closed-door approach. Frank Benest¹ describes these approaches as the ‘vending machine’ and the ‘barn-raiser’. The vending machine is a complicated box of machinery that delivers products for a fee. The

barn-raiser exposes a complicated process to everyone and asks for their help. A government that acts like a vending machine offers services that no one wants or understands, breaks down, and gets replaced every few years. A government that acts as a barn raiser uses collaborative leadership, builds trust, leverages the good will and skills of the community, draws on their unique knowledge and experience, and builds future capacity by bringing people in to the process.

What can a community do?

Some aspects of inclusive, open government are mandated by state legislation, such as financial transparency, but many local governments from communities of all sizes are going an extra mile or two in making their operations a real community matter. Some are using the internet to broaden communications and streamline access to information and services. Others are creating online forums to stimulate community dialogue.

By reaching out to young people, seniors, or specific neighborhoods, governments are filling gaps in citizen representation. To address specific challenges, many are building coalitions of business groups and community organizations and empowering them to find solutions and act. Some are delegating budget decisions, such as park and sidewalk upgrades, to neighborhood associations.

¹ Described in Frank Benest’s article “Serving customers or engaging citizen? What is the future of Local Government?” in [The Citizen’s Handbook](#).

Setting goals and taking action

Below are potential actions that can support a community's values around good governance. They are organized within four broad goals. This guide provides a review of each action.

Links to examples and additional resources are also provided.



website



pdf



book

GOALS

ACTIONS

Expand communications and access to information

- Designate communications as somebody's job
- Create a public assistance coordinator / help desk
- Create and use a communications strategy
- Put it online

Increase the role of the community in deliberation and decision-making

- Use committees or task forces to work on issues
- Form neighborhood associations and councils
- Hold community conversations
- Embrace the web

Include a broader audience

- Get youth on boards
- Make participation possible

Build capacity and commitment for open governance

- Adopt a public engagement policy
- Establish a civic engagement committee
- Create an annual report card
- Hold a community summit on governance

Goal Expand communications and access to information

Designate communications as somebody's job

Although regular communications with the public is a cornerstone of open and inclusive governments, it is often no one's responsibility or an ad hoc responsibility shared by various department managers or the town

manager. By assigning this role, a staff person can focus on developing communications skills, outreach strategies, and coordinating outreach in a more effective way.

Examples

-  [Communications department—Pierce County, Washington](#)
-  [Communications department—Minneapolis, Minnesota](#)

Create a public assistance coordinator / help desk

Similar to the communications role, public assistance can be coordinated through a single point of service or staff person, rather than through the secretary or manager of individual departments. The coordination

of this responsibility can free up staff time as well as offer more direct and streamlined responses to resident requests or applications.

Example

-  [Citizen assistance program—Chandler, Arizona](#)

Create and use a communications strategy

The variety of media outlets today, who uses them, and how to use them can be overwhelming. From public access channels to webcasting, and from good old newsletters to email lists, the options are too numer-

ous to select at random. A strategy helps find a focus in this cloud, helping staff and committee members save valuable time and helping community members know where to look.

Example

-  [Cape Elizabeth communications strategy](#)

Put it online

The Internet is a powerful way to communicate and share information. Over the past ten years or more, municipal websites have filled up with policies, bylaws, maps, monthly newsletters, demographic data, bud-

gets, meeting notices and minutes, and event calendars. Many towns are providing online application forms for permitting and registrations, fee collection, and bill payments.

Example

-  [Cape Elizabeth communications strategy](#)

Goal Increase the role of community in deliberation and decision-making

Use committees or task forces to work on issues

Volunteer committees provide opportunities for citizens to participate in government while lightening the load for municipal leaders and staff. Committees or subcommittees can be advisory groups that work on issues and make recommendations to the selectboard,

council, or staff. Many communities already have several committees that focus on operations such as finance, planning, or personnel. Others have, for example, committees on affordable housing, active transportation, youth, or environmental stewardship.

Example

 [Action committee roles and responsibilities—Hilo, Hawaii](#)

Form neighborhood associations and councils

Neighborhood Associations and Councils allow citizens to focus on issues that are closest to home, literally. These associations offer a local forum for discussion and provide a link between neighborhood residents and the municipality. A Neighborhood Council organizes the association and communicates with town staff and

officials. Councils can also review or provide input on municipal decisions such as budgeting or development proposals, conduct research or outreach, and delegate representatives to sit on a town committee. In some cases, Councils can and should have decision-making powers.

Example

 [Neighborhood planning assemblies—Burlington, Vermont](#)

Hold community conversations

These are regular, informal discussions with staff or community leaders, often held as a weekly or bimonthly event over coffee or lunch. Anyone in the community is

invited to attend, listen in, and speak up. Sessions may have themes, guest speakers, or presentations.

Embrace the web

Beyond websites and email lists, the Internet is exploding with tools for collaboration, discussion, and relationship building. From Facebook to i-Neighbors to Front Porch Forum, online forums allow residents to hear and introduce different points of view, share resources, and discuss issues. Other tools allow residents

to brainstorm and vote on ideas, access information through their cell phones, or use cell phone applications to flag and submit issues—such as a big pothole—as they walk the streets. A strategic approach to embracing Government 2.0 can help clarify the value and cost of each option.

Examples

 [Small towns go high tech](#)

 [Front Porch Forum](#)

Goal Include a broader audience

Get youth on board

Youth participation in local government is an excellent way for decision-makers to include a significant portion of their population, encourage civic engagement at an early age, and promote government transparency.

Youth participation can take many forms, examples include a separate youth council, a youth representative appointed to specific town boards and committees, or an annual youth summit.

Examples

 [Youth engagement project—Manchester, Vermont](#)

 [Toolbox for involving young community members in community development](#)

Make participation possible

Many people are unable to participate in local government because it is just not possible—to get there, to get into the building, to arrange for a babysitter, to understand the language, or to take time out of work. Many of these barriers to participation can be anticipated

and accommodated by providing child care or meals at meetings, timing events to work with family schedules, providing public internet access for online forums, choosing locations that are accessible, or locating meetings where public transit is available.

Goal Build capacity and commitment for open governance

Adopt a Public Engagement Policy

A public engagement policy can reinforce the local government's commitment to public engagement and transparency. The policy can be a simple statement of intent, or it can provide details about the decision-

making and engagement process for various types of projects, outline strategies for communications and outreach, and describe how public input will be recorded and applied to any decisions.

Example

 [Public involvement principles—Portland, Oregon](#)

Establish a civic engagement committee

A Civic Engagement Committee can be established with the specific task of advising municipal staff and leaders on how and when to effectively engage community

residents, how to promote and sustain participation, how to increase and broaden participation.

Create an annual report card

An annual report that monitors the community's progress towards specific goals helps local governments evaluate the success of their actions and recalibrate their efforts. These goals may include improving governance, but a broader approach that includes

all sectors of the community is a good way to build community awareness about what the local government is working on, the gaps they are trying to fill, and their achievements.

Examples

 [Vital Signs—Bellevue, Washington](#)

 [Sustainable Measures](#)

 [Jackson Hole, Wyoming](#)

Hold a community summit on governance

A community meeting can be geared specifically towards governance, and can be the kick off to a longer campaign towards a more open and inclusive government. A collaborative engagement process can create

the content and give legs to a strategic plan about improving governance, encouraging residents to get more involved by asking them to help identify issues, solutions, and recommended actions.

Example

 [CityCamp 'unconference' on Government 2.0 issues](#)



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