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Building Communities Through Civic Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement is based on the basic concepts of democracy. Engaged citizens understand that communities will prosper when they are governed by "the many" rather than "the few." Civic engagement is crucial for community leaders to be able to identify issues and to make good decisions. Civic engagement can include serving in a public office, but also includes ordinary citizens that want to be involved in determining the future of their community. Logically, communities that have high levels of civic engagement fare better and experience fewer declines than communities where apathy and disenfranchisement are the norm.

WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

Civic engagement can take many forms and can be an individual decision for every citizen and every community. A community's character is perceived through qualities that may be difficult to measure or are somewhat intangible, such as pride, community spirit, and values. Although they may be hard to quantify, these characteristics are the very motivators of individuals in a civically engaged society.

Civic engagement can take many forms:
- Being involved in associations, civic clubs, and groups.
- Serving on boards such as townships, school boards, or city councils.
- Volunteering and giving; monetary donations, donating blood, volunteering time, etc.
- Holding public office, voting, involvement in political campaigns.
- Expressing opinions through letters to the editor; supporting petitions on social or political issues.
- Reading/viewing news; researching topical issues.

BARRIERS TO CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

The reasons people choose not to get involved in communities are as varied as the reasons that drive people to get involved. Some researchers believe that civic involvement has been declining at an alarming rate over the past 50 years, and that is having an impact on communities all across the United States.

One reason cited for decline in civic engagement is a lack of trust within communities. An attitude of "us versus them" has caused a decline in involvement by individuals who feel disenfranchised by the systems that should be working together with them in communities.

Another reason blamed for the decline is the time deficit caused by lifestyle changes. Families today include more dual-wage earners, with both parents working outside the home, and more single parent families. Their busy lives leave little time for civic activities.

Sometimes barriers to civic involvement are based on who we are: Age, race, gender and social class can affect whether we choose to engage in civic activities. Community norms and past history can dictate whether people feel welcome in the conversation of civic issues.

Barriers to civic involvement can have a great effect on rural communities, particularly in an era where population decline, out-migration, and economic slumps stress a community's ability to survive and thrive. Individual citizens have the power to cause change—both positive and negative—in communities.

Recognizing how participation in civic issues can have a far-reaching impact on a community may help some people dissolve these barriers to civic engagement.

FOSTERING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN A COMMUNITY

There are four components to increasing civic engagement for individuals and communities (fig. 1):

1. **Knowledge and Education** – learning more about civic involvement through leadership training, reading the newspaper, attending city council or school board meetings, etc.
2. **Skill Building** – learning about and practicing conflict manangement skills, organizational skills, communication skills, critical thinking skills, etc.
3. **Participation** – participating in civic organizations, serving on boards, donating resources such as time and money, volunteering, voting, etc.
4. **Engagement** – immersion in shared power within a community, running for elected office, working together to solve community problems, active participation in decision making in a community, etc.
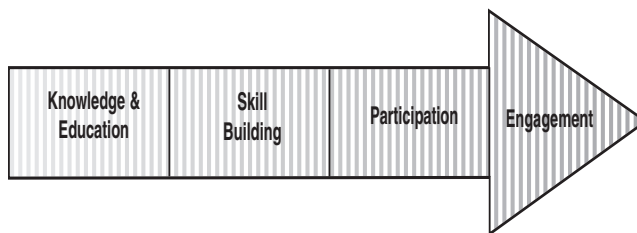

Figure 1. Components for increasing civic engagement

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