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# Rekindling the Public Romance

## Rethinking Civic Engagement

by Tony Andersen

In an ideal world, there's a romance. A romance where government decides on behalf of the community, and residents stay informed while sharing those decisions with their neighbors. Relationships grow, information is shared, and decisions are generally understood and transparent.

This is the ideal, but, unfortunately, not today's reality. These scenarios likely exist momentarily, yes, but it's time to be honest about the state of today's public affairs. The disengaged, or simply oblivious, civic climate requires policymakers and community advocates to rethink engagement and communication methods in order to rekindle the romance. This discussion highlights what community leaders and government professionals are doing in the metroscape to bring folks back to the civic conversation.

To start, this relationship is not a *new* phenomenon. The connection between the community and government is a product of generational culture shifts, evolutions in public opinion, changing demographics, and mostly the lack of a "retail" relationship among most people and government agencies. Maybe this is also nothing more than a phenomenon unique to American democracy, an enormous system built on contrarian checks-and-balances.

The current relationship is also no one person's fault. On the government side, it's always a resource issue. From my experience as a Public Information Officer at the Oregon Department of Forestry,

no staffer, administrator, or elected official would agree that public agencies have done all there is to do to fully engage communities. Like any workplace, competing priorities emerge. Projects pile up. The flavor of the moment and budgets take precedence. Until public engagement – including communications and public affairs staff – are seen as a necessity, it's fair to assume that priorities will be directed elsewhere.

On a positive note, polls report that local governments are trusted more than state and federal agencies. National voter turnout, though, typically hovers at 40% for midterm elections, and 60% for presidential races, and Oregon is no exception. These averages usually shrink for local and state elections, unless there's a presidential race. The latest *Oregon Values and Beliefs* (2013) study revealed increasing public concern over government spending, efficiency, and education reform. Local pollsters repeatedly hear from Oregonians that government is the least trusted American institution overall – often stemming from questions about transparency and inclusion, and frustration with inefficiency. This, in turn, breeds apathy, and voter turnout decreases or fluctuates instead of climbing upward.

So we have a problem. One housing good intentions, diminishing resources, and a spectrum of players so varied and complex that there's no single solution. But we can't sweep this one under the rug anymore, or point fingers at ignorance. We have to acknowledge it, and realize

that as policy professionals, we are fully capable of changing this troubling dynamic.

Part of the solution involves refining traditional and antiquated government communication, starting from scratch, and asking tough questions to inform a new era. Questions like what should the goal of public engagement be – helping people *own* decisions? Increasing information sharing and education? Increasing the number of people who participate outside the usual players?

Maybe all of the above. Sherry Arnstein started this discussion in the late sixties, pushing a framework she labeled a “public participation ladder,” and requesting an overhaul of government-ushered public participation. Her vision and call-to-action were compelling, but she failed to provide a roadmap for how to do it, instead residing in the hypothetical world of academia.

Fast forward forty years. Renee Irvin, Associate Professor with the University of Oregon’s department of Planning, Public Policy and Management packaged reality, experience, and vision in her 2004 article “Citizen Participation in Decision Making: Is It Worth the Effort?” This award-winning article not only tackles a number of tough issues, but reflects on personal experiences, concluding that, of course, citizen participation is worth the effort, but that it also must be targeted, strategic, and evaluated. Simply hosting a public meeting, and saying, “well, we tried,” isn’t enough anymore.

“I wrote the article in response to a feeling of frustration,” Irvin said from her Eugene office. “Why did just the government representatives come to our meetings, and not members of the public? It was just not compelling enough for an individual citizen to come to a meet-

ing. When the stakes are high for certain individuals or businesses, they’ll come. Everyone else affected by a proposed change just doesn’t have the time to participate in meetings – not even a single meeting. Thus, the broad public is never heard in these participatory processes, even though that’s the point of incorporating participation.”

“There may be high costs, but there also may be highly effective solutions,” Irvin continued. “Go to where the people are – their workplace cafeterias, their soccer games, their 5K runs, the dog park, their places of worship, and so on. When the stakes are high and you really need input from those who don’t have huge vested interests in the outcome, go visit with people where they congregate.”

One solution, used by many but by no means the silver bullet, is technology and online options – social media, online surveys, websites and blogs, interactive maps, and online communities, for example. Technology is one way to reach exponentially more people without adding full-time employees or spending countless hours in board rooms.

Technology, or what some have coined e-government, is a new wave but should not stand alone. It’s a great way to reach people where they are, but not a replacement for good old-fashioned face-to-face conversation.

Thad Miller, an assistant professor with Portland State University’s Toulon School of Urban Studies and Planning, has spent years researching and understanding how engagement processes help people interact with technology, and how it can be used to improve involvement. Miller led community members

*When the stakes are high and you really need input ... go visit with people where they congregate.*



**[Jacob's] vision and call-to-action were compelling, but she failed to provide a roadmap for how to do it...**

*Technology can cast a broader net, but usually only for a specific audience.*

on city tours, where they took photos that were later posted on a website to help reflect their story and priorities for the urban landscape.

“Technology can cast a broader net, but usually only for a specific audience. Online options are almost always inherently set. There are also a number of access issues. The ways in which you frame projects matter – and this may naturally leave some people out,” Miller said.

What do we do then? What’s happening in our region? What are best practices to borrow from and who’s pushing the envelope with new ideas? Our region is a big place with many different community identities. How do local agencies embrace and accommodate this diversity? The following ideas provide a snapshot of what’s happening in our backyard.

### **BPS: Map App**

The Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS) has translated the complex maze of prioritizing and explaining the city’s comprehensive planning process through an online mapping tool, called the “Map App” (find it here: <http://www.portlandbps.com/gis/cpmapp/>). The tool allows people to see and interact with future and current plans, implications for neighborhoods, employment ramifica-

tions, stormwater logistics, transportation planning and more. It has been the centerpiece for open houses, workshops, and planning meetings.

BPS's Map App represents a major stride in technology’s role in public participation, both for information-sharing and hands-on involvement. But is it enough? While not a standalone device for improving the public relationship, the tool allows for a greater degree of interaction than, for example, online surveys. But, in many ways, the Map App is a blackbox where only the options that planners want the public to consider are offered.

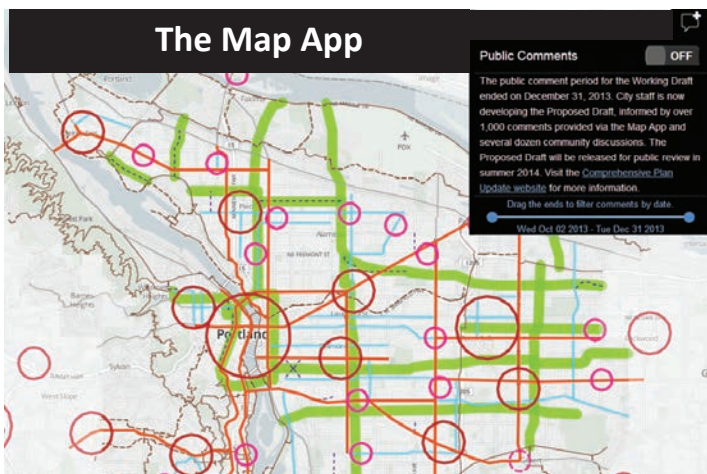
### **Beaverton: Outreach and Photovoice**

The City of Beaverton, partnering with Portland State University, has worked hard to highlight the importance of the messenger in public engagement efforts. When having conversations with communities, the messenger matters. Finding and using the right messenger is key to rekindling the public romance.

Beaverton, using a number of social media and online tools, empowers relevant messengers for open houses focused on bringing more people to the civic conversation. In fact, Beaverton has prioritized this approach in their budget and planning.

They also initiated a participatory research process for the City's Creekside District planning effort, called Photovoice. The Photovoice approach asks community members to use photography to explore issues that matter to them. Because it heavily relies on the power of images to tell stories, Photovoice can be a very effective tool for engaging non-English speaking residents and youth — priorities for Beaverton's planners.

“The bottom line is to try new things,







*Creo que nuestra comunidad es muy bonita pero necesita el apoyo de parte de la ciudad para poder progresar en estas cosas. Cuando hay ayuda en pequeñas cosas significa progreso para las cosas mas grande q' puedan venir.*

*Seria muy feliz vivir en un lugar limpio y decente donde mis hijos puedan disfrutar y estar orgullosos del lugar donde crecieron y hacer excelentes referencias de la experiencia q' viven en su vida.*

***I believe that our community is very pretty but it needs the support, on the City's part, to be able to get ahead in these matters [dealing with the garbage]. When there is support in these small things it means progress for bigger things that might come.***

***It would be blissful to live in a clean and decent place where my children can enjoy and be proud of the place where they grew up.***

— Beaverton resident

look for creative options to make engagement easy and go where the people are to get input,” said Stevie Freeman-Montes, Sustainability Coordinator for the City.

The participants' photographs, captions, and small-group conversations about the Creekside District revealed, in often compelling and personal terms, many of the day-to-day challenges that community members face. Much of the feedback is being fed directly into the Creekside District Master Plan to revitalize downtown Beaverton.

“In Beaverton, we’ve realized it takes different options to get people involved,” Freeman-Montes continued, accompanied by program manager Holly Thompson. “We have to make it easy, welcoming, and provide multiple platforms. For example, one in four Beaverton residents were born outside of the United States. To support the participation of our diverse community, we have a Beaverton Organizing and Leadership Development program to train 20 or more immigrant and refugee community members about local government. We have started a Diversity Advisory Board, tasked with advising the City on culturally specific outreach strategies. We have to evolve with the people we serve to make sure we are working together to define vibrant civic engagement and participation.”

“One of our biggest challenges is capacity,” Thompson added. “We know that you have to use multiple methods to reach people, but in trying new things you still need to invest in the traditional methods. Our city newsletter and print postcards still rate as top ways that people get information.”

### **Metro: Opt-In and *Metro News***

Metro, the region’s unique government planning agency, has followed its pioneering planning efforts with redefining engagement and involvement.

The first, the Opt-In Online Panel (<http://opt-inpanel.org>), is a fancy brand for a huge mailing



**It's your community – make it great!**

Have you ever wanted to share your views about parks, neighborhoods, transportation, recycling or other issues that affect your quality of life? Here's your chance. Metro and its partners created Opt In to make it easier for your voice to be heard in the public decision making process. To participate, all you have to do is take one or two short online surveys each month about topics that affect your community. **Join Opt In Now!**

list. At last count there were over 20,000 people signed on. The list itself isn't necessarily the inventive piece to this, although the numbers are impressive. More significant is how the panel functions as a two-way conversation and educator through online surveys and interactive information. People can weigh in on major Metro Council decisions, and do so from the comfort of their own homes.

For panels and online communities to work, they must stay relevant, active, and applicable. There's also a fine line to dance to stay present in inboxes without spamming. Managing these panels isn't rocket science – some, even Metro, have spent money on consultants to craft messages, questions, and management plans. But consultants aren't needed for this relatively cheap approach – all it takes is someone computer savvy enough to upload contacts, vet questions with key staff, and enough foresight to make adjustments over time.

Another Metro idea redefines transparency through employing a Metro-paid, though independent, reporter to write about council decisions and events through *Metro News*. The challenges involved are straightforward – an independent reporter paid by those he's reporting on – but introduces an interesting point. The *Metro News* project asserts both that it's okay to experiment and blow up traditional government PR, and that trust can be built through knowing someone on the inside. Unfortunately, the project

seems to have lost steam, based on the tone and nature of recent stories, and Nick Christensen, the brave soul “infiltrating the halls of bureaucracy” continues on in the hope that *Metro News* will survive.

“Oregonians place a special value on public participation. I think with that comes a responsibility to be informed before participating. If we can clearly explain the sausage-making process, there's less room for complaint later on when the sausage is actually made,” said Christensen. “As traditional media descends deeper into a weird world where a default attitude of cynicism, search-engine-optimized headlines and omnipresent click counters guide news gathering and storytelling, I still think there's a place for government to hold the beacon, and perform journalism in the interest of public service. At the end of the day, the public should be the ultimate judge of the content – if they don't feel like it's trustworthy, we aren't doing our jobs right.”

**Black Parent Initiative**

Though not a public agency, the Black Parent Initiative (BPI), headed by community leader Charles McGee, is setting the tone for public agencies in engaging communities of color. With the premise that online options and technology are great tools, but that people genuinely



A North Portland family finishes a class hosted by Black Parent Initiative staff, learning both the basics of good parenting, and how to stay an active community member. Photograph courtesy of the Black Parent Initiative 2014.



engage through social interaction and community-building, McGee and BPI hold regular parenting classes that go beyond simply teaching good parenting. The classes also provide the tools for active community participation, stressing that involvement must be taught and instilled early and often.

“By engaging children early, and telling them they can be great from the beginning, we’re succeeding in positively touching and engaging young people early on, and working to change the message and conversation,” said McGee.

“Let’s imbed diversity into Portland’s culture and the greater community as a form of outreach – through jobs, through committees, through conversations. We have to be more critical, and define what it means to engage in the system as a person of color. How can local governments better connect with communities of color? It’s about building relationships, so that we can then have those tough conversations and move to next steps from there,” McGee added from his north Portland home.

### VisionPDX

In 2007, VisionPDX was the largest engagement project undertaken by the City of Portland, and one of the largest nationally. It brought together diverse Portlanders to articulate a twenty-year vision for Portland, occurring through workshops, committees, online tools, surveys, kiosks, entertainment, and submitted comments, among others.

“It was a community-driven process resulting in a community-driven vision,” said Sheila Martin, Director of the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies at the College of Urban & Public Affairs at Portland State University, and co-chair of the project.

VisionPDX wasn’t a single tool serving



BroadArts Theatre held 10+ performances of their highly lauded interactive cabaret, "If I Were the Queen of this Forest." The show invited audience members to share what they wanted for Portland's future. Photograph courtesy of VisionPDX.

a single mission. The project is a model for how multiple engagement approaches coalesce to pursue a broader set of goals, resulting in a complex dialogue packaged into a community-inspired vision for Portland’s future. Notably, it also points to the significant challenges associated with rekindling the civic romance.

“I think Portland is a very engaged community for the most part, but there are many people who don’t have the time or attention to get deeply involved in some of the important decisions that our leaders are making on behalf of the community,” Martin reflected. “We need to make it easy for people to engage by using terminology that they can understand, processes that they can easily plug into when they have time, and opportunities to learn and provide input outside of the normal format of community meetings or city council sessions. Using local groups and nonprofits that are already working in the community to engage citizens is a good idea.”

Martin said that just because an engagement tool is interesting or intriguing does not always mean it’s effective. She said, for example, the “interactive kiosk” used for the VisionPDX project generated a lot of attention but didn’t work very well and wasn’t fully accessible.

*Just because an engagement tool is interesting or intriguing does not always mean that it's effective.*

“Sometimes technology is NOT the right answer. But most importantly, when taking input from the community, take it seriously and use the information that is provided. If people can see their own lives and their own concerns reflected in the document or plan, they will feel ownership and feel that they have been heard,” Martin added.

### **Oregon Department of Forestry: Rural Engagement**

At Forestry, we’ve learned similar lessons and work hard consistently to increase public involvement. For rural communities in the northern Willamette Valley, we’ve found that online options are nice,

members to lead and provide front-end input on forest planning efforts.

### **Call to Action**

Don’t tread lightly. The erosion of community engagement in civic decision making is a very real dilemma, making innovative engagement efforts all the more necessary to improve today’s cultural climate. Unfortunately, for any number of reasons, engagement efforts often tend to divert back to the status quo, or face the unfortunate fate of an eliminated project expense. Luckily, we have models, in our own backyard, to learn and borrow from.

The new engagement conversation requires honest and experimental brainstorming amongst everyone – not just people making a living from it – about how to rekindle the public romance and what the ideal looks like. Complacency and the status quo will only lead to irrevocable issues or the need for a too-late marriage counselor.

Fortunately, we live in a region open to the challenge of finding the right set of solutions—solutions that can effectively reach and engage the diversity of the people who live here. Not finding these, or discontinuing trying new things, could result in a separation of far-reaching proportions.

This won’t happen overnight, and it isn’t going to happen at a Portland City Club banquet. This shift will happen within communities, with folks outside the inner circles, telling their neighbors to join the conversation and to stay engaged. **M**

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**Community members in Astoria peruse Forest Service plans. Photograph courtesy of Tony Andersen, Oregon Department of Forestry.**

but that traditional face-to-face interaction works best for addressing polarizing issues. By refining the “talking head” approach, and giving community members a seat at the table to discuss in a truly community-driven fashion, residents confront challenges, learn, and take ownership. Natural resource conversations include disparate interests, and although tensions may boil, discussions are productive and two-way, even amongst those on different sides of the aisle. These discussions, called “Roundtable Events,” allow community