

Fort Collins, Colorado: An Expectation of Public Engagement

BY AARON LEAVY

Government leaders in Fort Collins, Colorado say that the expectation citizens have regarding engagement has shifted the way they work and the outcomes they produce. For example, in many communities, dealing with the mosquitos that cause West Nile virus is a choice between aggressive spraying of pesticides or none at all. For Fort Collins another way forward was apparent only after engaging residents. Instead of all or nothing, they found an approach that respected and reflected the concerns of a community that cares deeply about health and environmental issues. It is an example of how civic engagement has helped the city and residents identify a solution to a problem that might have been different from the initial starting points. City officials, in other words, sought to understand the different views and find a workable consensus.

“People here want to get involved and want to be engaged,” noted a city staff member in one of the several interviews conducted in a case study of city government and public engagement in Fort Collins. “It is a community expectation that we will do robust civic engagement. Council rarely, if ever, makes decisions of any real impact without a significant engagement process. And if they tried to do it, people would storm City Hall and say, ‘You didn’t talk to this group, this group or this group. Isn’t my opinion important to you?’”

Community expectations and norms are built over time. Similarly, government culture, like the culture of any organization, is an accumulation of years of decisions, individual actions, and collective efforts. Neither organizational culture nor community expectations emerges overnight, nor do they spring into life without sustained effort and attention. In the city of Fort Collins, citizens expect to be engaged by their government on matters large and small. At the same time, local government—particularly city government—has

intentionally sought to create an organizational culture that not only values but also mandates resident engagement. Both resident expectations and government culture have evolved to reinforce one another.

It is difficult to separate the city’s commitment to engagement from the community’s expectation of engagement. Whether resident demand prompted staff to more actively, consistently, and creatively engage the public or whether a commitment to engagement and a dedication to applying the learning to policy shifted the public’s expectation is hard to say. This case study—based on interviews with four Fort Collins’ staff members, including the assistant city manager—seeks to better understand the necessary components and embedded challenges that come with sustaining this culture of engagement.

The Role of City Council in Supporting Engagement

Fort Collins’ city staff say that the community expects to be engaged, and they have created a culture of meeting, if not trying to exceed, that expectation. The city council and staff consider how to engage the public early on in the process.

Staff submit an engagement plan to Council before setting out to design or develop policies. One city employee explained the process,

“We’ve instituted a public engagement plan for anything that is coming to Council so they could see the timing of projects, our messaging, what we’re going to be asking or informing citizens on,” noted one member of the city’s staff. “[The plan] also calls out major stakeholders who we’ll be targeting. So if we were missing a group, or if Council feels a stakeholder group

was unbalanced they could let us know and we could shift gears early enough in the project to supplement or adjust as necessary.

Having a clear public engagement plan, including targeted groups, stakeholders, and a sense of the questions before starting any project helps ensure that the council and staff are on the same page moving forward. One city employee explained the impetus for developing and sharing an engagement plan with the council before taking action saying, “We realized that we had to have a structure for both our elected officials and our staff to be on the same page upfront about the purpose of public engagement.” This expectation that engagement is included and considered before acting seems to set the tone for future actions. As one staffer sees it, “I think the biggest thing we do that’s unique relative to other places is we actually have a citizen engagement plan for every initiative that we undertake.”

While city council members rely on staff to engage the public and report on what they’ve learned, they are also directly involved with resident engagement. Many council members hold coffee chats—announcing that they’ll be getting a cup of coffee at a given shop and spending an hour or more talking with anyone who wants to chat. A city employee described the process: “Some of our longstanding council members have coffee chats. They’ll say, ‘People in my district, I’ll be at coffee shop X. Show up and we’ll talk about whatever you want.’ And for council members a light turn out is something like 15 people. And it’ll even get to 50 people, to me that’s a lot for a community of our size [152,000 as of 2013].”

Another staffer explained that council members eagerly seek out people during the breaks in the council agenda to follow up with those who asked questions or made comments during the session.

Staff say that council members frequently seek to amend or update policies in real time based on comments from residents during the council meetings. When resident input leads to direct impact on the wording of a proposed policy or ordinance, it sends a clear message to citizens that their experiences and ideas matter to the city and its leaders. One city staff member explained:

If, at first reading, there’s a whole bunch of public input and there are ideas brought forward, you’ll see council members go, “hmmm, I hadn’t thought about that. Or that’s a good idea.” And they’ll, on the fly, sometimes tweak or change it—and say to staff, “Go back and see if you can do this.” I think our residents see that their input is valued and they’re not just going through the motions. Council members listen during public comment, and they engage.

This process of amending the language of ordinances—during the meeting—based on public input was happening often enough that staff and council recently implemented a system to project the text of an ordinance on a screen visible to all in attendance. And by having the city attorney in attendance, ordinances can be updated in real time based on suggestions and input from residents. A staffer explained the new system:

We just put a system in place in our council chambers so that our city attorney can be sitting there making changes to the ordinance and have it projected onto a screen so that the public is able to see and council can see the adjustments in real-time—based on the comments that were just heard ... I don’t know where it started but it is built into the fabric of the community that Council does take seriously public input. So, when people see those behaviors that helps [encourage resident engagement].

Staff members cited the generally robust attendance at city council meetings as one example of the community’s desire to engage with their government and with one another. A staff member explained that: “It is an expectation that we engage. At a council meeting, general public comment time comes up and the lines are close to the door and we have three podiums for them. That’s just for general comment.” Citizens overwhelm the capacity of the City Council Chambers with such frequency that the staff have developed a standard “overflow” protocol that they can implement in a matter of less than an hour.

We have a standard protocol—our Council Overflow Program. We know that frequently we

will have more people here than will fit in the city council chambers. So we just have a plan for that. The plan includes several departments including Operation Services and Communications. We bring out the clickers and hand them to people at the door, and we open up overflow seating, and [ensure the meeting] is televised to that area. We have staffed rooms. We're ready. We can turn it on in an hour. So we know that is necessary for big community things. We have that same expectation around engagement for things that affect a relatively small number of people.

City council and staff members promote engagement not only between the city and its residents but also between different resident groups. In one iconic case, which demonstrates the council's belief in the power and potential of engagement, the city approved the creation of a community garden in a public park, sparking outrage from those living near the park. Those who loved the new community garden and those who hated its placement strenuously lobbied the council, asking that they make a decision about the park and its future. Instead, the council saw residents engaging one another and coming to consensus as the way forward. Council asked representatives of the different groups to meet with city staff at the park to discuss what could be done. In a snowstorm, proponents and opponents of the community garden met with staff and walked the length and breadth of the park, before coming to a compromise that worked for all involved. In the end, the council sought to create space for residents to work with the city staff to solve the problem rather than make a decision for the community.

Finding Common Ground and Solutions in an Oft-Divided Community Through Engagement

Staff believe that part of residents' desire to engage around key issues comes from the fact that the town is evenly split on nearly every issue. These splits are not just around traditional "left vs. right" issues but around more localized choices such as how to address West Nile virus or setting community gardens. The even split pushes city staff to try to find consensus, rather than being able to rely on a simple majority rule. Staff say that working toward that

consensus means active and on-going engagement. As one staffer said, "We work hard to get to middle ground. And the only way to get there is through extensive citizen engagement."

Staff members say that the integrity of the process and the clear impact that public engagement has in shaping policy further reinforces people's willingness to engage. Residents see that their ideas are valued not only by the city council but by the staff in developing policy recommendations. A staff member explained:

I also think that the integrity of the process helps. People need to know that it's fair and that we genuinely are going to incorporate their perspectives. It doesn't mean we're always going to end up where they wanted us to, but we work really hard to incorporate those perspectives. I think that's why people don't get frustrated, in fact they want to stay engaged because they can see that it makes a difference.

Fort Collins has a long history of active and engaged citizenry. Starting in 1973, the city has time and again put forth different plans for ways to use sales tax to improve the community. The current project, Building on Basics, began in 2006 and was set to expire in 2015. The city embarked on an 18-month engagement plan, talking with residents about their priorities, their concerns, and their visions for the community. A longtime city staffer explains how this year's initiative fits into the history of Fort Collins's approach to financing and engagement.

This goes way back to 1973. There was a ton of citizen engagement and visioning. We don't have a capital budget and we don't bond. What we do is say, "Let's get a dedicated amount of 1 cent [on a sales tax], and here's what we'll do with it." Since 1973 we've been able to say, "Here's what we said we'd do with that sales tax revenue. We did XYZ." Then we're able to go back to the voters and say, "Here's some other needs, what do you want us to do?" So the latest one, it was called Building on Basics, ran from 2006 and will expire at the end of 2015. After an 18-month public engagement process to determine the projects we want to fund, we settled on those details in April. It's all outlined for ten years' worth ... we're going to

spend \$4 million on the Poudre River, \$2 million on a visitor center at the gardens on spring creek, \$14 million upgrading our sidewalks, etc. That tax will bring in \$83 million over ten years and then we can do community improvements. That passed by 84 percent. Another quarter cent was assigned for street maintenance—and that passed as well. Not one dollar was spent promoting that, and it passed with 85 percent.

Creating an Organizational Culture of Engagement

The staffers of Fort Collins with whom we spoke, describe a “culture of engagement.” As they see it, this approach permeates work throughout the government. Asked to describe the culture being created, one staffer explained, “We value public opinion and feel that better decisions are made based upon engaging the public. That’s the ethic from which everything derives.”

To sustain that culture, city staff talked about how a focus on engagement shapes their hiring practices. One staff said, “We hire people who have that ethic [focus on engagement]. It starts with the type of people you hire.” Determining whether applicants are able to advance the city’s engagement goals is often a factor in hiring decisions. “Cultural fit”—whether a candidate shares the values of the city, including a focus on engagement—is part of evaluating candidates. This is particularly true for supervisors and managers.

One staff member said: The higher you go up, the more it [ability with and interest in engagement] matters We’ve had super smart people and everyone said, “Yup, that’s the smartest one here,” but do they understand the culture? Another city employee explained, “When we evaluate candidates, the evaluation matrix has cultural fit as one of the things that we talk about. So we talk about experience, planning skills, and cultural fit.”

According to the staff, the focus on hiring people who are able to meaningfully engage residents is paying off. One employee explained, “Right now we’re doing a neighborhood plan. If you listen to the engagement that’s happening around this downtown neighborhood planning, it’s off the charts. Most of the ideas came from new folks that we’ve

hired who have this energy around doing even more and better engagement.”

The Challenges of Active Engagement

Creating and maintaining an organizational culture that values engagement is not without its challenges. One challenge arising from active engagement is tracking and acting on the information gained. A community where engagement is frequent but where action and follow up are rare is recipe for frustration and resentment. If the city of Fort Collins is actively and regularly engaging the community and people continue to attend meetings and participate, it suggests that people see their community benefit from their involvement. One way that the city ensures that engagement leads to action is through its use of two technologies. The first is their SAR system, which helps to ensure that when residents engage with council members they receive prompt responses to their questions or comments. As one staff member described it:

We have an SAR system. A comment from a resident or a council member is emailed in, and then it is electronically assigned to a staff member and then we have 3 to 5 days to respond to it. That engagement system allows us to take it in in detail, track it, provide answers and alternatives, and then go out. So it’s not like things come in and get forgotten. So a resident knows that if they go out for a coffee chat and they have an idea or a question, then the council member will take it down and we have systems in place to react to it. That helps to legitimize their taking their time to come to an engagement process.

Access Fort Collins is another tool for ensuring follow up and helping residents navigate the complexity of city government. This website and app allows residents to submit questions or comments without having to know the specific department or person in charge of that subject. Keyword analysis sorts messages to the appropriate person and appropriate department. And complex or nuanced messages are routed by a staffer “in the Communications office who manually reviews anything that is marked ‘other’ or includes multiple requests.” Residents can even use the app to take pictures of potholes or

other areas of concern and automatically send them along with their comments or concerns.

Another challenge in sustaining a strong culture of engagement comes from the simple fact that active and meaningful engagement can be time consuming. It can be easy to imagine making a quick decision and moving on rather than taking the time and energy to go to the community. Staff acknowledge that engaging the public actively and consistently can, at times, slow down the process. “It does slow things down sometimes, but it’s worth it.” But the City Council and key city leaders stress to staff the importance of engagement as a method to achieve better results. And they work to reinforce this idea with staff. One high-ranking city official said, “Here we embrace the time it takes to perfect a policy. [We have] a better community because of robust engagement and it’s not lip service.”

Ultimately, the staff with whom we spoke say that by engaging the public they can create better policies and face difficult choices with greater confidence, knowing that they have heard the community and made an informed decision. As one staff explained, “To be at the council table confident that you provided opportunities and talked to everyone and you’ve weighed those—for all the frustration that comes with being staff, that’s the real reward.” Being able to highlight the benefits to the individual staff member that comes from engagement helps to sustain a culture where engagement is valued.

A final challenge to an engagement-focused culture is that of resources. Staff recognize that meeting the expectations of the community around engagement requires different staffing and resource allocation than might be seen in other cities. Describing what it takes to support a city-wide focus on engagement, one staffer cut to the chase and said:

If people ask, “How’s Fort Collins doing it?” We resource it. We resource the heck out of our community engagement. We spend a lot of time, a lot of money and a lot of FTEs. When I was at Kettering and I rattled off all the stuff we do, they were looking at me and asked how many people you have in your public information office and they were surprised by my answer. And we still, for our community, don’t have

enough resources. Not for the expectations of our citizens.

In sustaining its culture of civic engagement, Fort Collins has a valuable resource that most communities don’t possess, the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University. The center trains university students to be small group facilitators and assists in the designing and implementing of a number of deliberative projects for city and county government, school districts, and community organizations. For instance, since 2013, the Center has organized a series of community issues forums, teaming up with the city staff to give residents opportunities to participate in deliberative discussions of pressing local concerns. The Center is also helping the city’s Neighborhood Resources Department boost the organizational capacity and problem-solving ability of local neighborhoods.

Staff members see proof of the value of engagement in the community’s response to a series of recent ballot measures. As with other efforts, active and thorough engagement with the community shaped the final ballot language in a way that balanced different views. Instead of picking between one of two options and pushing hard with marketing and communications, these initiatives emerged from discussion with residents and as a result were overwhelmingly supported on Election Day. The public’s willingness to increase their taxes to support city initiatives tells staffers that engagement is working not only to shape better policy but to build trust between the city and its residents. A staffer describes the Keep Fort Collins Great initiative this way:

I think of our ballot initiatives as places where you can see a direct impact. Keep Fort Collins Great was a recent initiative and we started with a discussion focused on “Do we cut services? or Do we ask the voters for more money?” As you can imagine we started that process with many people saying, “Just cut services.” Then we went out and started to have dialogues about what that would look like. Talking about the various options we have. And through a series of—I can’t even tell you how many—meetings we ended up going from a choice of “Do you cut services?” or “Do you put a 1 cent ballot measure forward?” to a place where we said, “We don’t need a cent.

We'll put forward .85 and we'll do it for just 10 years while we see what happens with the economy." And that was very different from where we started. But it ultimately got widespread support from the community.

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