

INSIGHT

Managing public meetings during quarantine

It's a new age of social distancing and crowd restrictions, yet in most towns, public policy discussions continue and infrastructure projects roll on. How can an organization responsibly engage citizens who want to stay in the know?

Technology is the obvious answer, and a blend of high-tech and low-tech can cater to all populations, regardless of their technology access and expertise.

- **Live video feed:** Broadcasting over a local cable access channel is a frequent tool for connecting with community members watching at home. Interactive options like Facebook Live or GoToWebinar could allow the public to comment and ask questions when appropriate.
- **Recorded Video Feed *or* Virtual Town Hall**: Schematics, plans, and 3D visualizations can be scrolled or panned in a controlled view, like a PowerPoint, with scripted commentary about impacts and schedule. Commentary can address the public's most frequently asked questions.
- **Conference calls:** For citizens who are less tech savvy or may not have access to technology, conference calls provide a basic, reliable solution. Through speaker phone, the public can engage in a commentary period.

- **Direct mail:** Letters and postcards are still a reliable way to inform and engage targeted households. Outline key facts or spotlight an upcoming virtual meeting about an important topic and provide an email address for any questions or concerns. A QR code could take readers straight to the website with a quick cell phone scan.
- **Websites:** A website could showcase schematics and plans around infrastructure projects, facts, calendar events or other pertinent information. Static presentations of schematics and plans have a long history on state and local government project websites.
- **Discussion boards:** Although discussion boards have a dwindling level of interest, like newspapers they cannot be ignored when transmitting project info on milestones and events. Discussion boards are an add-on option, if time allows, to make sure “no stone is unturned” in public engagement.
- **Social media:** Social media platforms tend to be at-a-glance, short-form content channels. Social media is ideally suited for live streaming, public polling, or content like reminders, news updates, advice and links to other content channels.

Engaging the public

When preparing to engage with the public, envision yourself in the audience member’s position. Do they need context before the meeting? Consider providing documents or agendas by web, email or direct mail.

Will the audience have questions? Look for interactive channels where they can still engage in a public comment period from a safe distance. Are there any action items or public opinion items that will result from this meeting? Consider follow-up communications to show that your organization is remaining accountable and responsive to that, like meeting minutes or notes and action item updates after the fact.

When the public is under quarantine, transparency still matters – perhaps more than ever before. Carefully planning a responsible and responsive public engagement strategy during this time will yield long-term dividends in terms of public trust, engagement and appreciation.