

Active Citizenship



In 2015, there is higher voter registration and a strong turnout of an informed electorate.

T rue citizenship involves not only rights but responsibilities. Active citizens are citizens who participate in the planning, decision making and implementation of programs in their neighborhoods and in the wider community. Effective citizen involvement in community affairs is important to the future well-being of our community. Citizens must be well informed and be willing to advise policy-makers about their opinions and concerns. This requires a responsive citizen involvement environment. Citizen involvement initiatives facilitate participation by the public in community affairs by removing barriers to access and involvement by citizens, thus making it easier for them to contribute to governance and to improving the quality of life in their community.

In Forsyth County and Winston-Salem there are existing avenues for direct citizen involvement in government. These include many citizen boards and commissions that advise elected members as they make policy decisions. Citizens are also encouraged to volunteer in a variety of city departments. Public hearings and meetings are held on specific issues to encourage citizen comment. The City of Winston-Salem Marketing and Communications Department provides citizens with information about city services and programs using a range of available media.

In spite of these initiatives, many citizens in Forsyth County are unaware of how their government works or their responsibilities to ensure effective government. Government seems distant and unapproachable and citizens often exhibit apathy. Further, the typical citizens who actively participate in community and governmental

affairs are generally not representative of a wide cross section of the community. There are segments of the community who feel that government is unresponsive, that issues important to them are largely unaddressed and that their voice is not heard. The challenge, therefore, is to increase the level of involvement of citizens in community affairs and broaden the range of citizens who actively participate in decisions regarding how their neighborhoods and the wider community will grow and thrive in partnership with government.

Our Vision

The *Legacy* Focus Groups have envisioned a future in which the quality of life in Forsyth County is improved by all segments of the community becoming more actively involved in determining how their community will grow and develop; working together with public officials in defining the community's goals and objectives; and, participating in the implementation of plans and policies.

In the year 2015 we envision that...

- ☉ We value involving, informing and empowering the people of Forsyth County to enable them to participate in a meaningful way in the decisions which affect the quality of their lives.
- ☉ Citizens work closely with elected officials to reach shared community goals and to pro-

mote regulations that work for citizens.

- ☉ A broad base of citizens regularly participate in community affairs.
- ☉ There is higher voter registration and a strong turnout of an informed electorate.
- ☉ The *Neighborhood Services Program*, designed to assist in neighborhood improvement, is a major resource for communication between citizens and government.
- ☉ The *Council of Neighborhoods*, a volunteer organization made up of representatives of neighborhood associations, coordinates neighborhood participation in community affairs.

Goals, Objectives, Policies and Action Agenda

Goal:

Active and involved citizens and a responsive environment for citizen participation that promotes involvement in community affairs and contributes to the quality of life in our community.

Objective 1: Volunteerism

An increased level of volunteerism from a broad base of citizens which positively impacts the future well-being of our community.

Volunteers are citizens who give freely of their time, energy and talent to improve the quality of life for residents of our community. The 1997 Forsyth County Volunteerism Survey, conducted by the Forsyth County Delegates to the Governor's Summit on Volunteerism, confirmed that we have volunteers in a wide range of community activities. The group surveyed major employers, nonprofit organizations, small businesses, high school students, public school and college employees. The survey revealed that 55 percent of respondents volunteered for an organized cause or organization. The highest level of volunteering was among retirees and the lowest among corporations, businesses and government. The two main areas where residents volunteer are churches and religious programs as well as educational and school programs. Significantly, forty-two percent of non-volunteers said they had not been asked or they didn't know how to get involved. This suggests a need to increase efforts to make information available on volunteer opportunities and to attract potential volunteers.

Major employers and local governments can encourage their employees to volunteer by providing information to employees on volunteer opportunities, allowing employees time off for volunteer work, maintaining a coordinator of vol-

unteer activities, providing matching funds, recognizing and awarding outstanding employee volunteers and supporting volunteer work by retired employees. The City of Winston-Salem has a volunteer program. Employees are encouraged to volunteer with groups and agencies outside of city government and citizens are invited to volunteer in city government departments.

The United Way Volunteer Center coordinates many volunteer activities in Forsyth County. The Center provides advice and information about volunteering, matches the personal interest and skills of volunteers to a wide range of volunteering opportunities, provides training and orientation to volunteers, supports volunteer organizations and encourages major employers to promote volunteerism among their workers. Every year during National Volunteer Week, awards are given to outstanding volunteers in recognition of their



Habitat for Humanity volunteers at work.

contribution to the community. The Center notes that the demand for volunteers exceeds the supply. The Center publishes a monthly newsletter and has a weekly radio program that features volunteer opportunities.

The effective functioning of local government requires that citizens volunteer to be members of boards and commissions which advise elected government on policy. Forsyth County, for example, has 606 volunteer positions on 38 boards and commissions. In our increasingly diverse community, it is important to widen the pool of volunteers to include not only an increased number of people but also a broad base of citizens representing wider cross sections of the community. Special efforts must be made to achieve this objective.

Policies

- Continue to use the United Way Volunteer Center as a clearing house to organize the recruitment and deployment of volunteers for committees and projects on a City/County basis, and make information available on volunteer opportunities and organizations. Increase outreach efforts to attract more volunteers.
- Encourage the appointment of coordinators for volunteer activities in local government and at major employers.
- Encourage major employers to support volunteer work by allowing time off for volunteer activities, particularly in the areas of education and local government.

- Target retired employees, student interns and under represented groups for volunteer activities.
- Continue to recognize outstanding community volunteers.

.....
**Objective 2:
 Neighborhood Associations**

Strong neighborhood associations that provide opportunities for neighborhood residents to have their voices heard on neighborhood and community-wide issues.

Neighbors in many areas of Forsyth County have come together to form associations. A neighborhood association might be defined as an organization of citizens bound together by a geographic area who cooperate to support and improve the quality of life in their neighborhood. It can be a home owners association or an independent organization consisting of people who live or work in a neighborhood. Neighborhood associations often form initially for social reasons or when an issue like crime or traffic unites them. From there, many groups evolve and focus on the long-range overall health of the neighborhood. Associations can therefore be major vehicles for participation of residents not only in issues which affect their own neighborhoods but in issues of community-wide concern.

While many people in Forsyth County are getting involved in their neighborhoods, there are still many neighborhoods without neigh-

borhood associations. Since neighborhood organizations are a good vehicle for communication between residents and government and because they usually work to improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods, we need to encourage the formation of more neighborhood associations.

There are some resources available in the community to help neighbors in disadvantaged areas to start neighborhood associations and to assist neighborhoods with projects and training. The *Neighbors for Better Neighborhoods* program (NBN) of the Winston-Salem Foundation is one such resource. It is a program to develop and support neighborhood associations in selected neighborhoods where residents have incomes that are lower than average for our community. The goals of the NBN are:

- To increase resident participation in solving problems in lower-income neighborhoods.
- To increase the capacity of neighborhood organizations to address issues of neighborhood concern.
- To promote community awareness of issues important to lower-income neighborhoods.
- To provide financial assistance to organizations in lower-income neighborhoods for neighborhood self help efforts.

Several Winston-Salem neighborhood associations received technical assistance from the NBN program in recent years. The NBN program is responsible for the Neighborhood Leaders School aimed at producing good neighborhood leadership. It funds the publication "Commonalities: Newsletters of Neighborhoods in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County." It also

connects neighborhoods and the broader community.

Neighborhood associations are most often concerned with issues affecting their immediate area. However, there are many regional issues that also can impact individual neighborhoods. They include the location of major new roads and the siting of regional serving facilities. An alliance of neighborhood associations could serve as an important channel of communication both among the County's neighborhoods on these issues and between neighborhoods and local government.

Government's role should be to act as a clearing house of information on how to start and run a successful association. Government should also help educate these groups on how government works so neighborhood associations can deal more effectively with issues that concern them.

The City of Winston-Salem has created a Neighborhood Services Program with the idea of encouraging communication between the City and its neighborhoods and assisting neighborhoods in improving their community. The City's Neighborhood Services Office will be responsible for implementing the program. Its responsibilities include educating neighborhoods about the functions of city government; meeting and communicating regularly with neighborhoods on issues important to them; assisting in the planning and implementation of neighborhood improvements; maintaining a database of neighborhoods and neighborhood organizations; maintaining a catalogue of services available to neighborhoods; assisting neighborhood groups in organizing themselves to deal with community issues; and acting as liaison between neighbor-

hoods and city departments. If this program is successful, consideration should be given to expanding it county-wide.

Policies

- Encourage the establishment of organized neighborhood associations in neighborhoods where they do not exist.
- Continue to publicize, celebrate and reward neighborhood accomplishments.
- Continue the Neighbors for Better Neighborhoods program.
- Encourage elected officials to utilize neighborhood associations as a communication channel.
- Encourage neighborhood associations to coordinate on issues of county-wide importance and communicate their members' views to government.

Action Agenda

- Consider expanding the Neighborhood Services Program county-wide with the role of enhancing communication and cooperation between governments and their citizens.

**Objective 3:
Citizen Involvement Programs**

Increased opportunities for citizen involvement in all aspects of the governing process.

Collaboration between government and its citizens is essential to good governance. Successful participation by citizens in the governing process is dependent on citizens understanding how government works and knowing when and where they may participate. Efforts must be made to educate citizens in the working of government and to encourage involvement by all segments of the community. A variety of methods, therefore, have to be employed to make information available to citizens and solicit their active participation in planning for their communities.

Extensive citizen involvement requires a commitment of staff time and funding. In the short term, involving citizens and developing a consensus on plans, policies and programs may take longer, require more resources and, therefore, be less efficient than the “top down” approach. However, the longer term benefits will be the consensus and public support needed to fund and implement these plans and programs. Community Development Corporations like Pangea, Goler Church/Depot Street, East Winston, North Winston, South Side, Freddy Ray, Liberty East Redevelopment and the Downtown Development Corporation have become an important part of citizenship participation.

Policies

- Continue to appoint a wide variety of people to the citizen advisory boards and commissions to bring together citizens’ views on a wide variety of issues and advise public officials on policy decisions.
- Make special efforts to increase the opportunities for involvement by groups of citizens who do not generally participate in community affairs.
- Provide citizens with opportunities to participate in developing plans and programs for their communities.
- Make information on government activities widely available to the public.



Neighborhood residents and volunteer groups participate in Community Roots Day.

**Objective 4:
Effective Communication**

Effective two-way communication between citizens and local government officials.

A variety of methods have traditionally been used to aid two-way communication between public officials and citizens. Public meetings, newsletters, mailings, posters, surveys, newspapers, radio and TV programs and workshops are all means of providing information to citizens and getting feedback. Today a new communication medium, the Internet, is revolutionizing the way government provides information and services. This new electronic communication technology promises to empower citizens by making information on all aspects of government instantly available on computer screens in citizens’ homes.

To say that the Internet has revolutionized how we communicate is almost an understatement. The Internet increasingly shapes the manner in which we shop, play, and conduct our day-to-day business. Commercial banking provides an example of the improved communication and service made possible by this technology. Instead of standing in long lines waiting for the next available teller, today the customer’s interaction with the bank is increasingly through the automated teller machine (ATM) network. Electronic banking—a relatively new development on the consumer banking front—also is gaining popularity. A large portfolio of banking services is now available via Internet access from home personal computers. Private enterprise is serving its cus-

tomers better using these technologies. Those customers are increasingly demanding the same level of improved information and service from government.

Government departments and agencies provide an increasing amount of information about their services and programs on their websites. *Legacy* is posted on the Forsyth County website. Forsyth County also has property tax information online that allows users to create customized “live” maps which show property ownership and tax values, street locations, schools and voting districts, etc.

Unfortunately, a “digital divide” exists on the Internet. A recent study found that 59 percent of whites used the Web in the past six months, compared with 31 percent of African Americans. The study found that some but not all of the difference in use could be explained by the availability of computers. The Internet will take an increasingly important role in providing information and communication between governments and citizens. The rewards of this open communication need to be available to everyone.

Policies

- Maximize the use of communications technology to facilitate the exchange of information between public officials and citizens. This includes use of government and private community-oriented Internet websites to provide on-line community information and encourage citizen involvement; and conducting electronic town meetings on major community issues.

- Ensure that technical information is available in understandable form and that all segments of citizens are afforded access to this information.

Action Agenda

- Develop public information and education programs to inform and educate citizens on how government works and on issues that affect the communities in which they live.
- Provide training in methods and techniques that enhance the civic communication skills of citizens, staff and officials.

Conclusions

This chapter has tried to point out the responsibilities of both citizens and government in active citizenship. Citizens need to be involved in all phases of planning for the future of their community. However, there is no assurance that every person who gets involved will get what he or she wants. Government for its part has a responsibility to provide an opportunity for all citizens to be involved and assure effective two-way communications between local officials and citizens.