NH Listens Candidate Conversations Toolkit:
How to Host a Community Conversation with Candidates Running for Local Office

Hosting a Candidate Conversation night is a terrific way to engage and inform residents, and support a tradition of civil conversation in your community. The information below is an introductory guide on the steps that need to be done by your Local Listens organization. Portsmouth Listens, Pittsfield Listens, and Dover Listens have all hosted candidate conversations with great success. If you are interested in hosting an event, contact us at NH.Listens@unh.edu or call 862.0692 and we will email you the full NH Listens Candidate Conversations Toolkit for you to use as you choose. We are always happy to talk with you about your plan and offer guidance along the way.

Overview

Traditional "candidate forums" often involve candidates lining up in front of an audience and answering questions from a designated moderator. Often there is little or no time for voters to ask their own questions or otherwise interact with the candidates. "Town hall" meetings were hailed as an advance with candidates taking questions directly from the audience, but often the audience and questions were screened. How can you really know a candidate unless you can look him or her in the eye and hear their answers to your questions about the things that matter most to you?

"Listens" Candidate Conversations, based on the fundamental principles of open dialogue, put voters at the heart of the candidate forum process by creating opportunities for voters to designate the issues and ask the questions. At a "Listens" Candidate Conversation, all participants are invited to join in small groups (8 to 12) and are given the opportunity talk about what matters most to them. As the candidates rotate among the participant groups, they interact directly with all partcipants over the course of the event. In this way, voters have a chance to hear all candidates respond to their questions and measure the candidates on their own standards.

Please Note: *Treating all candidates equally and establishing and maintaining a strong nonpartisan presence in your community is critical to the success of this event.*

Sponsors and Partnerships

Many towns have some type of forum for engaging candidates. A "Listens" Candidate Conversation might be a good opportunity to augment current activities with the opportunity to meet and directly engage candidates in a uniquely small and facilitated format. The local chamber of commerce may host a traditional question and answer forum or a local news source might print a summary of statements or positions from candidates. Consider reaching out to them or similar organizations to co-promote your events. This gives people the chance to choose from a few different ways to learn more about their candidates for local office.

Timeline and Tasks

Find out the filing deadline in your town, the date by which anyone planning to run for office will need to register their intention to run. With the exception of write-in candidates, the filing of this information will give you a name and contact information for each person and the office they are seeking. Following the closing date, send invitations to candidates seeking their participation.

At-A-Glance

Can be done prior to Intent to Run Closing Date
- Secure co-sponsorship
- Determine date, time, and location for candidate conversation
- Draft invitation letters for candidates
- Share the event date and time with your facilitator network and begin to get a commitment from those willing to facilitate a small group
- Partner with a local school or youth organization and consider hosting a Youth Voice Table as part of your event.

At closing date
- Contact your town clerk to get information on each candidate.
- Send invitations to candidates indicating you will follow up with a phone call if you haven't heard back by a predetermined date.
- Seek in-kind donations for snacks, water, and coffee, copying or supply needs, and advertising.
- Assign roles for event greeters and hospitality (food and drink), large group moderator, registration table, and small group facilitators.
- Supplies – nametags, markers, easels and flip charts, copies of discussion guide and participant evaluation
- Discussion guide preparation
- Facilitator training and discussion guide review

Day of the Event
- Arrive early to set up the event space.
- Post a sign thanking donors for their support.
- Plan to brief your facilitators approximately 1 hour prior to the start of the event. Spend 15 minutes or so answering questions, assigning small groups, and managing any last minute issues.
- About 30 minutes prior to start time, be ready to greet everyone who comes in the door. Have one or two people specifically assigned to talking with candidates and answering their questions. This process is new to many and it will be important to welcome and reassure them.
- Don't hesitate to use a microphone, especially if you are in a large venue.
- Consider having voting registration and location information available
- Closing reminders: Thank you, evaluations, and remember to vote!

Week following the event
- Thank-you notes to candidates, facilitators, co-sponsors, donors, etc.
- Compile the results of participant evaluations
- Write and send a letter to the editor of your local paper summarizing the event and thanking the community members for attending

Format

Each local Listens organization can adapt a community conversation format for their particular community. Portsmouth Listens has made great use of the Portsmouth Herald newspaper by publishing the candidate's written answers to questions posed by citizens. Theirs is a two-event process with published information happening in between the two events. Pittsfield Listens and Dover Listens each cosponsors a single event with their area Chamber of Commerce to engage all candidates for local office, including the select board and the school board. Whatever you choose, the toolkit samples should serve as templates for your outreach and planning. All of these materials are open for your use and adaptation and should save you time.