



At-a-Glance: Hosting a Local Community Conversation

Below are a few things to keep in mind when planning a single community conversation or an extended engagement process. NH Listens is available for technical assistance to help along the way. Much of the work happens in advance of an event with these critical steps:

Knowing and Understanding Your Community

- Understanding begins with having a mix of perspectives, roles, and political views on the Project Planning Committee. It is also dependent on those people being active in the community and keeping abreast of issues and concerns in your community.
- If ideas are raised for a community conversation, test the topic and idea with lots of different people. What do you think of this idea? Do you think this would be an important issue to talk about? Have there been efforts to address the issue in the past and, if so, what happened? How has the issue been reported in local media, and what role has the media played in defining the issue and the views held about it?
- Make sure discussion topics lend themselves to public deliberation—some things are very interesting but the ability to act on and access information could be limited by legal matters or privacy issues.
- Build relationships with decision makers so the role of a community conversation is understood, welcomed, and endorsed.

Identifying and Framing a Key Issue

- Framing the topic for a community conversation is one of the most important steps in the process. The goal is to create a framing question or statement that is open-ended, does not presuppose any particular outcome, reflects the primary concerns to be addressed, and can lead to concrete findings or recommendations as a result of the conversation. A conversation tied to potential solutions or actions will attract participants.
- A framing question or statement should be broad enough to allow for a discussion of all the parts of an issue, but not so broad that it doesn't get at the key concerns to the community. Likewise, it should not be so narrow that parts of the problem are not considered. Essentially, the framing should allow community residents to see what the topic is and why it might matter to them.
- The construction of the framing question or statement is an important role for the Planning Committee; it should reflect the shared concerns of the community, not just the way one part of the community sees the problem. You can see examples of framing questions by looking at the Reports section of the NH Listens web page.

Building a Balanced Planning Committee

- A Planning Committee for a community conversation is often chaired by the Local Listens organization or other neutral party and is created intentionally of six to ten individuals who represent key sectors of the community (for example, government, education, business, clergy, youth, elderly, and immigrants).
- Participants should be seen as constructive leaders capable of working effectively with others. No single individual, organization, or cause should be seen as “owning” the Planning Committee.
- The Planning Committee should see itself as representing the community’s concerns broadly; individual members should not have a specific agenda or cause they want to push using the Listens process. The committee serves the whole community and all its interests. Planning Committees typically make a relatively short-term commitment to meeting two to three times to frame the issue, advise and assist organizers in outreach, and oversee the assembly of relevant data (to be used in the discussion guide).

Reaching Out Widely for Representative Participation

- This is by far the most time consuming step, but it is the one that makes all the difference in the validity of your outcomes. For example, if a community plans a conversation on Education, and participants attend from only one side of town or are all parents or teachers, then your findings will be seen as serving only the interests of those groups, not the whole community.
- There are three core strategies for participant recruitment we recommend.
 - First, use all available traditional forms of media—social media, newspapers, local radio, community cable television, posters, flyers, etc.
 - Second, partner with organizations that represent specific segments of the community to use their communication channels (newsletters, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, list serves) to reach their constituents. Examples of recruiting through existing networks include places of worship, service clubs, youth organizations, tenant associations, senior centers, chambers of commerce, and so on.
 - Third, take the time to reach out directly to individuals who can bring along others. This means phone calls, personal visits, or personal emails to explain the community conversation and its purpose and to ask the individual to come and bring as many others from his/her network as possible. This last strategy is especially useful for reaching people who often don’t participate in public forums or meetings, for any number of reasons.
- Finding trusted, involved leaders in these networks and having them invite others can increase the diversity and representativeness of the community conversation participants. The most effective invitation is from someone we know.

We Heard You: Reporting Findings to Your Community

- Consider in advance how you will disseminate findings from the conversation and which decision makers will need to be asked to consider the information. We suggest emailing the results to all participants, sharing results face-to-face with decision makers, and summarizing results in a local paper or key source of news.
- Early in the planning stages, ask to present your proposed conversation to decision makers (such as school boards, town councils, and planning boards) and seek their endorsement and agreement to seriously consider the findings.

Moving from Talk to Action

- Once the conversation takes place and the findings are shared, the work continues. This might include tracking related decisions made by a local board, helping support an action group who works to accomplish a clear outcome, or supporting a research group where additional information is needed.
- During this phase, your Local Listens organization or Planning Committee might advocate to ensure the findings are used by the appropriate decision makers, taking care not to advocate for a particular action, but seeing to it that decision makers have given due consideration to the findings of a community conversation.

Please note: For our purposes, we are distinguishing between the ongoing leadership of your Local Listens group from the short-term Planning Committee that is pulled together for a specific issue. The need for balance in both is similar but their work differs in scope and focus.