

Civic engagement in Arlington

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Uniqueness of Arlington, VA

- Arlington County is one of the most highly educated counties in America (60% of adult residents have M.A. Degrees or higher)
- Arlington is positioned as 6th richest county in America (based on Median Household Income – 2016) at \$110,388
- Arlington geographically next to center of national government with unlimited financial resources and loose constraints
- Demographics emphasize that 28,860 individuals move to County annually.
- Substantial number of residents work in the federal government and have experienced use of government power to impact behavior.

So what does this mean for engagement?

1. It means Arlington Citizens are well educated and savvy to real listening and real engagement
2. It means Arlington Citizens are busy, very busy to generate income either through single earners, a two-earner household, or multiple earners. They don't have time to waste.
3. Resource allocation (choosing priorities based on revenue limits) appear not as important because of federal spending discipline (all choices can be funded).
4. New residents require easy ways to get engaged with little or no knowledge of how.

ARLINGTON HAS A LONG COMMITMENT TO PARTICIPATION AMONG ITS STAKEHOLDERS

IN FACT, THE 'ARLINGTON WAY' HAS A LONG HISTORY

County Mission

"Arlington will be a diverse and inclusive world-class urban community with secure, attractive residential and commercial neighborhoods where people unite to form a caring, learning, participating, sustainable community in which each person is important."

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HOW DO WE OBJECTIVELY MEASURE IF THIS MISSION IS BEING ACCOMPLISHED?

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OR ENGAGEMENT

FOUR STEPS TOWARD SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT

1. Determine how engagement is defined as successful
2. Need to actively inform stakeholders with complete information to be decided (information outflow)
3. Work toward an active dialogue and interaction between the elected officials, staff, and stakeholders
4. Report results to stakeholders

County Board and School Board information outflow

- Newsletters
- Emails
- Television show(s)
- Surveys
- Paper notices
- Information through media
- Townhall meetings (office hours)



County/School Board has solid information outflow

But a few of their practice could be improved to serve stakeholders better

Surveys

- The surveys sent to residents appear to inject bias into the questions to:
 - make false choices (raise taxes or fire teachers)
 - offer incomplete information (cost estimates are not provided or alternative investments offered)
 - provides not provide a “none of the above” or none option (test overall support for Boards as a whole)
 - Open ended questions to seek candid input
- Provide public information on survey results

Arlington TV

- Arlington TV has existed since 1981
- Provides good conduit for county board activities
- Not sure it is marketed well to Arlington residents



- This most recent edition only had 105 views
- Need to make an economic calculation if the money is being best spent on this program or if it needs to be marketed better to citizens

School Board Open Hours

- Technology and the pandemic has increased the use of Microsoft Team and Zoom, etc. to connect with stakeholders. I applauded the School Board for using technology to connect.



**Open Office Hour through 1 p.m.
Staff is waiting in the virtual lobby**

**Please submit a question in the
questions box**

- One suggestion might be to add more conversational question/answer opportunities to get more engagement and reaction.

County Advisory Groups

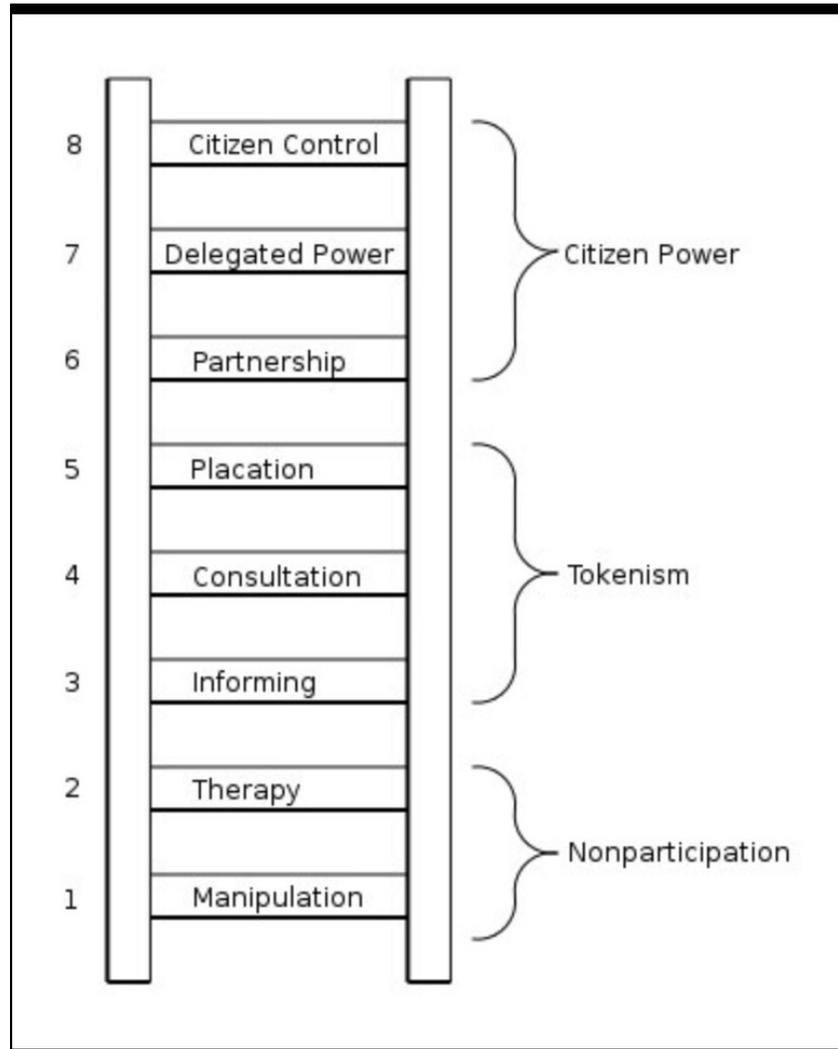
- 50+ Advisory and Commission Groups
- People volunteer and then are selected by County Board for limited terms, but are often reappointed
- Certain Groups are also consulted by County Manager for input into county plans
- The County must decide if they are taking the suggestions seriously and not waste volunteer time and depress engagement
- Need to invoke more transparency to foster real engagement so individuals or interest groups do not carry greater weight in decision – making
- Any ties to Board members should be made public to assure independence

County/School Board staff

“Principle- Agent” issue

- Arlington County staff is partial listing only
- Arlington School Board looks like it has only 4 employees
- It would be nice if County Board listed total staff, payroll, and duties to be fully transparent (website did allow searching by name of 465 pages)
- Principal-Agent issue argues that the principal (stakeholders) and agent (county staff) may have different incentives or preferences in solving issue or improving Arlington.

Possible engagement model – Arnstein Ladder



Conclusion

Successful engagement issues

1. Outflow of information – good but could be improved through measurement of effectiveness
2. Authentic dialogue and conversation between elected officials And representatives.
3. Minimizing staff driven policymaking since they lack incentive to be outstanding stewards of resources
4. Objective measurement of results for those in office to have Accountability
5. Maximum use of transparency to reassure stakeholders that Economic costs are minimized.
6. Open dialogue process so stakeholders feel their ideas and opinions are taken seriously
7. Outside evaluation of communications to be sure there is no Unconscious bias or policy prejudice