



2018 STRATEGIC PLAN

VIENNA AS AN (EFFECTIVELY) ENGAGED COMMUNITY

Sharmaine Abaied, Planning and Zoning Department
Lynne Coan, Marketing & Communications Department
Sgt. Patrick Kiley, Police Department
Terri Tufano, Parks & Recreation Department

What is community engagement?

If you were to ask seven different Councilmembers – or seven different engagement professionals – this question, it's likely that you would get seven different answers. For this reason, we felt it important to begin our policy brief with some of our conclusions about what community engagement is – and what it is not.

Borrowing from concepts put forward by Dr. Crispin Butteriss in his July 2016 blog, *What is community engagement, exactly?*, we believe that there is no single answer to the question and that the various definitions of community engagement are all accurate within their own context. We also believe that community engagement is a process as well as an outcome.

Within the Town of Vienna, community engagement is, among other things:

- a prescribed part of the decision-making process required to vet land-use plans, obtain citizen feedback, and get plans to the approval stage (ideally, this is seen as a crucial part of the design process rather than a necessary evil)
- the connection that citizens have to their local governing body, the community at large, and one another, often measured by the level of volunteerism, event attendance, or active users of Town facilities and programs
- the way that citizens feel about the Town of Vienna (corporate) and the community
- a commitment to providing accurate information about Town decisions, policies, programs, and initiatives
- about decision making, relationship development, and capacity building.

Ideally, in Vienna and elsewhere, community engagement is a TWO-WAY process through which the aspirations, concerns, needs, and values of ALL citizens is incorporated at ALL LEVELS and in ALL SECTORS of policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery, and assessment. That being said, it became clear to us that community engagement DOES NOT MEAN that everyone is happy with the decisions that are made and policies that are implemented. Effective engagement is making sure that everyone is heard and has an opportunity to be part of the process, if they want.

A tradition of engagement

The Town of Vienna has a long history as a close-knit, authentic small town with a strong tradition of community engagement. It was community members and organizations who first led the charge (and fundraising efforts) in the 1960s to build the community center. Many of Vienna's oldest and best-attended events are managed by community organizations.

In conducting the individual interviews and focus groups that formed the core of the Town's branding research in 2017, Trialogue Studio found that citizens defined Vienna as:

- Welcoming – a strong community open to all
- Fun – great Town spirit, best events in the county that capture everything we want to be
- Connected – in all ways – personal, professional, civic
- Small – a real small town, not just a zip code in a sea of sameness
- Committed – to causes, volunteering, and keeping the Town great
- Caring – for one another and the Town itself, keeping civic and community groups strong

These findings underscore the value that citizens place on feeling connected to and engaged with their community.

Results from the 2016 Citizen Survey also seem to indicate citizens' overall participation in and satisfaction with community engagement opportunities.

- 87% were satisfied or very satisfied with overall quality of public information efforts and availability of information about services; 83% were satisfied with the overall effectiveness of communications with the community
- 91% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the Town newsletter and 81% with the Town website; 96% of households indicated that they had read the Town newsletter over the past 12 months
- a high majority reported visiting a Town of Vienna park in the past 12 months (87%), attending a community event (70%), and obtaining information about events and programs from the Town's website or social media posts (69%); 33% reported participating in a parks & recreation class

Estimates indicate that attendance at Town events has increased modestly over the past two decades. The Parks & Recreation Department estimates that 34,650 people attended Town events (excluding ViVa! Vienna!) in 1997; the estimate for last year is 40,610. Participation in parks & recreation classes and programs has increased more dramatically. In 1994, 1,221 people registered for classes, which had a maximum capacity of 3,929. So far this year, 2,353 people have registered for classes, which had a maximum capacity of 5,678.

Based on this data and other anecdotal evidence, it seems clear that Vienna is a highly engaged community with a well-informed, interested, and vocal citizenry. The Town successfully engages its residents through events, activities, communication strategies, and a high-level of staff/Council responsiveness. The one engagement area in which there seems potential for dramatic improvement relates to public participation in the decision-making process, particularly as it relates to land-use changes and opportunities for MAC redevelopment or when there are other matters of concern or controversy.

Council recently has expressed a desire for more “transparency” in sharing of data and in public participation in the processes by which land-use decisions are determined. However, it appears that the Town typically reacts to critical public feedback more in a “kneejerk” fashion than in a proactive, thoughtful, and well-planned process. The strategies adopted, while meeting – and often exceeding – minimum requirements, do not appear to be effective in engaging a broad range of citizens nor in utilizing staff time/efforts.

In 2017, Town Council held nine public hearings. At five of those public hearings, no citizens spoke; 17 speakers spoke at four different public hearings, 14 of those at two of the public hearings. From November 2015-July 2017, the parks and recreation department held monthly community update meetings on the community center project. Across those 21 meetings, approximately 15 people attended, averaging less than one citizen participant per meeting. Recently, the planning and zoning

department held a series of six community/informational meetings related to the parking condominium proposal. About 26 citizens in total attended those meetings, averaging a lower attendance per meeting than there were staff members present at each meeting. It seems that perhaps Vienna is over-meeting and under-engaging.

Many of our recommendations relate to establishing a carefully thought-through, upfront, and sometimes creative process for more effectively and efficiently fostering community engagement in the land-use/development decision-making process. This doesn't mean that we believe that the Town should not continue to hold public hearings or informational meetings, but that it should focus efforts on a creating a coordinated process, developing strategies that all parties are aware of upfront, that take the information and opportunity to give feedback to where community members are when possible, and that result in a decision in which (while not everyone may be satisfied with) everyone who wanted to had an opportunity to provide input.

Driving & Restraining Forces

Driving Forces

- Vienna history/tradition of valuing community engagement
- Council's desire to be more transparent and to encourage more engagement in land-use decisions
- events
- small-town atmosphere
- high ratings on citizen and national surveys
- residential neighborhoods and walkability of community
- citizen care about where they live, invested in the community
- independent nature of community and an affinity for the "Vienna way"
- communications tools – social media, website, newsletter, cable channel, etc.

- public meetings
- staff and processes in place
- technology – always new opportunities
- availability of staff

Restraining Forces

- people’s busy lifestyles
- information overload
- sometimes inefficient, difficult Town processes
- limited staff time
- limited financial resources
- changing messages (midstream)
- desire for all citizens to be happy with decisions
- small-town atmosphere and some citizens’ tendency to “talk to the mayor (or other Councilmember)” if not happy with staff decision; this is tied to a failure sometimes to follow a “chain of command” when addressing concerns
- old guard way of thinking
- limited number of tickets for some events
- availability of staff
- kneejerk reactions to “fixing” situations rather than well-conceived, planned-ahead-of-time processes for providing for engagement
- language barriers
- unrealistic expectations

Our vision for community engagement

When our committee members think about the kind of engaged community we wish for Vienna in the future, we envision a Vienna much like the Town is today with:

- a well-informed public with information (good, bad, and indifferent) pushed out accurately and across a variety of mediums
- something going on all the time and great events; perhaps with more of a willingness to retire any “tired” events in favor of trying 1-2 new events each year
- strong partnerships with other community organizations in the realization that the Town can’t do it all by itself
- opportunities for community members to interact with one another as well as their local government
- multiple entry ways to engage with the Town – in person, online, “on the street,” at events, through new technologically enhanced opportunities

We also envision a community that is a role model for efficient and effective citizen engagement, that has made a conscious and deep commitment to community engagement not as a “have to” to be checked off the list, but as a key ingredient in bold, effective, and better decision-making. Arlington County has recently made this kind of commitment a strategic priority and is beta-testing its newly developed processes for engagement related to capital projects. Arlington has committed to:

- rethinking from the ground up how the county engages its community
- engaging not just a small portion of its public, but all of its residents, often using pop-up meeting opportunities
- communicating with, not at, its residents
- developing a public engagement guide or decision matrix for staff, based on the International Association for Public Participation’s inform-consult-involve-collaborate-empower continuum of public participation; used to determine, design, and implement engagement strategies for all new capital projects
- providing staff and financial resources to this priority
- training staff
- creating a consistent process that everyone in the community understands so that it can’t be disrupted by only a few “squeaky wheel” voices
- being more consistent with language, processes, and how business is conducted in order to enhance transparency

- taking information and opportunities for feedback to where the residents are, not insisting that they come to the county
- ensuring that everyone who wants to be heard has an opportunity
- living with the fact that not everyone will be happy with every decision made.

Arlington has repositioned its communications function so that it is now the Office of Communications and Public Engagement. It may be that in order for Vienna to underscore the importance of its commitment to high-quality public engagement and to ensure accountability, the Town will want to restructure/reframe its staff functions. We believe that it may be beneficial to restructure/create a position that assumes responsibility for the Town's overall engagement processes and strategies.

We believe that establishment of a community engagement process similar to Arlington's will address another concern that came to our attention through this strategic planning process. Perhaps because Vienna is a small town, there is sometimes a tendency among residents to "go straight to the top" with concerns and issues, bypassing the established staff chain of command. Of course, we can't control what citizens do or with whom they choose to communicate, but it seems that a mayoral or Council referral back down the chain to the appropriate staff member or director would free up Council time, allow staff to appropriately take the lead on non-political and non-policy issues, and present a "united front."

Another way in which we envision a more engaged Vienna relates to creative placemaking. It seems that Vienna is missing a unique element that identifies the community and defines it as a destination. Public art, and especially a public art project that in some way actively engages community members, could provide a creative solution to this deficiency. We're thinking about placemaking icons and destination drivers like The Bean in Chicago, the River Walk in San Antonio, the lovers' locks on a Paris bridge, and the gum wall in Seattle. We recommend exploring options for something unique – and

ideally interactive – on the trail or Town Green, both of which we feel are underutilized. At a minimum, perhaps Town residents could help create (on a paint-by-number style basis) community murals.

Related to the above suggestion, we'd love to see Vienna "blow up" Halloween. We're already known regionally for our Halloween parade. Could we not build on that success by hosting related events, encouraging businesses to decorate windows in a Halloween theme or opening the doors to trick and treaters? Again, perhaps we could incorporate the W&OD Trail in some way.

Additional recommendations

As Council considers strategic goals related to maintaining and enhancing Vienna as an engaged community, we offer for its consideration the following additional goals and potential strategies, several of which relate to points already addressed in this brief.

Provide better electronic engagement tools

- Several companies (Bang the Table, Social Pinpoint, Neighborland) provide electronic toolboxes that include surveys, online forums, virtual reality, interactive mapping, ideation tools, virtual post-it notes, FAQs, and polls. In reviewing communities that have been early adopters of these tools (City of Penticton, CA and Niagara Falls, Canada) we also found clear project timelines for community engagement opportunities and easy access to online opportunities, related documents, project information, and feedback summaries.
- Utilize an interactive map, similar to that used by Fairfax County (<http://www.fairfaxva.gov/government/community-development-planning/development-review-projects-map>) to provide information and indicate various stages of development projects.
- Update and make the Town's website more user-friendly. (Soon to be in process – check!)
- Consider Facebook Live for specific, appropriate opportunities.
- Create project FAQ videos and/or podcasts.

Be more efficient and creative in engaging residents

- Make engagement a strategic priority with Council and staff commitment throughout the organization.
- Develop an engagement process for determining appropriate levels of engagement as well as strategies for planning and public works projects.

- Go to where citizens are; utilizing pop-up opportunities and staffing information booths at community events.
- Encourage more staff representation within community organizations.
- Encourage more consistent Council representation (but not necessarily participation) at public engagement events.
- Be willing to try new strategies when situation warrants.
- Develop and offer a Vienna 101 course.

Continue to develop strong community partnerships

- There may be some missed opportunities, with, for example, community-minded businesses like Whole Foods.
- Build the relationship with NOVA Parks to explore placemaking opportunities along the W&OD Trail.
- Explore the Community Heart & Soul process and the Orton Family Foundation grant program for community engagement projects.

Consider 4-year terms for Council with elections in November

- Four-year terms may allow for bolder decisions, and more substantive, forward-looking legislation.
- Councilmembers aren't continually in campaign mode.
- A Los Angeles commission found that moving municipal elections to coincide with state and federal elections has the greatest effect on voter turnout. In Newton, New Jersey, local voter turnout jumped from 15% to 70% when local elections were moved from May to November.
- 534 people participated in the most recent Town election.
- 54 Virginia towns hold November elections.
- Elections represent the ultimate citizen engagement.