

Engaging Citizen Input Activities: Getting out of the Box

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Key Words

Community Engagement, Public Input, Citizen Input

Background

Many local park directors and community leaders struggle with the current issues in citizen engagement. Most prominently is that community meetings are often considered boring.¹ Citizens are less engaged and meetings provide few opportunities for interaction.^{1,2,3,4,5} Additionally, meetings typically lack a representative sample of citizens from the community.^{1,4}

The top reason people cite for not participating in community engagement activities is “lack of time and other priorities.”⁶ While community leaders are often confined by limited resources and minimal standards for what is considered “engagement,” many are frustrated with low participation and attendance.⁴

When making decisions about public resources, it is key for community leaders to utilize tools that guarantee all community members have some opportunity to engage.⁵ One of the International Association for Public Participation’s core values is that “public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.”⁷

In addition to consciously working to reach broader audiences, leaders need to offer activities that are engaging and or even fun.^{1,5} They should also encourage two-way communication.⁵ Researchers in public participation believe that when citizen input activities are interactive and enjoyable, they are more likely to accomplish their goals.¹

The following worksheets are examples of tools recently used by Texas AgriLife Extension and a local Texas community to increase citizen engagement and by: reaching a broader range of citizens by meeting with people at community places that are a part of their daily lives; and implementing activities that balance interactions with citizens to encourage two-way dialog.

What Communities Can Do

- Set a clear goal.
- Have consistent and clear questions.
- Select engaging and interactive activities that are meaningful to your goal.
- Have an adequate number of well trained staff.
- Attend places in all geographic areas of your

community at different times and on various days.

- Host events at a variety of places that residents of various neighborhoods visit as part of their daily lives.
- Use social media when appropriate.
- Encourage two-way dialog.
- Understand your limitations.
- Have a plan for systematic data collection, data entry, data analysis, and reporting.
- Pilot test your process.

Relevant Extension Resources

- Landau, S. and Walker, J.R. *Framework Driven Citizen Input Processes*. Available at agrilife.org/urbanparks/
- Going to the People and Getting the Feedback You Need (PowerPoint). Available at agrilife.org/urbanparks/
- Dynamic Citizen Input Activities. (PowerPoint). Available at agrilife.org/urbanparks/

References

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7. Lerner, J. (2014). *Making democracy fun: How game design can empower citizens and transform politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Engaging Citizen Input Processes

Connecting with Citizens Outside the Box

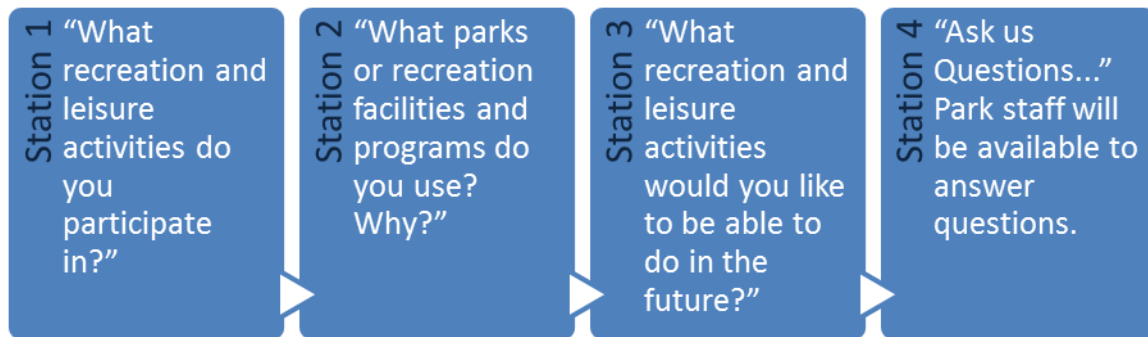
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Goals

- To connect with local citizens at local places around the community.
- To improve communication between parks department representatives and local citizens.
- To understand activities citizens participate in at parks and recreation facilities.

Activities

Four stations will be set in proximity to various local entrances. Stations 1-3 will have questions printed on large laminated posters on which participants can directly write their answers (see below). Station 4 allows for direct discussion with PARD staff. Facilitators should be trained to interact with participants and probe them about various responses.



Locations

With proper approval, sessions were hosted at local parks, shops, grocery stores, gas stations in various geographic areas of the community. Sessions were strategically scheduled to cover various locations around town at several different times on various days.

Supplies

- Laminated posters with printed questions (3)
- Markers
- Map of park system laminated
- Existing Park department Informational brochures
- Tape/adhesive to hold maps and posters to wall
- Signs about the process (3-6)
- Clipboards/paper/pens to take notes
- Table/chairs (unless available at location)
- Signs indicating parks staff are available for questions
- Camera to capture photos of responses listed on posters
- Towels and spray to clean posters as needed
- Accommodation plan for special needs.

Strengths

- Not time consuming for participants
- Creates connections between park staff and residents
- Informal-not intimidating, approachable
- Creates opportunities to connect with a broader array of residents- not just specific stakeholders
- Generates/creates an opportunity for dialogue

Limitations

- It might not be convenient timing for people
- Difficult to engage shy/quiet people (might just walk past)
- Not as focused
- Times are random, more difficult for intentional visitors
- Will not know if they are residents of your community
- Responses could be influenced by current season/weather

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Connecting with Citizens Online

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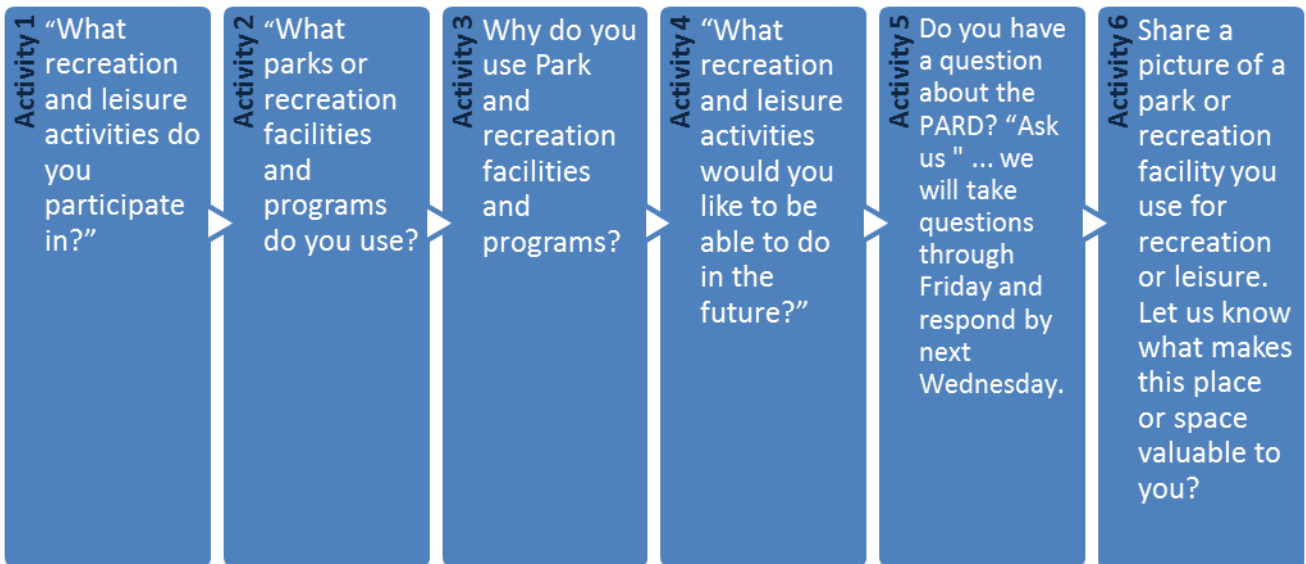
Goals

- To connect with local citizens.
- To improve communication between parks department representatives and citizens.
- To understand activities citizens participate in at parks and recreation facilities.



Activities

Six separate social media activities will occur via Twitter and Facebook.* Four activities will simply ask followers to reply to posts. The fifth activity will consist of a Q&A. Times and methods for responding will need to be determined. The last activity will consist of having participants upload pictures and respond in text.



Supplies/Support

- Social media accounts
- Staff to post and monitor accounts
- Schedule for posts

Strengths

- Not time consuming
- Easy for “followers” to participate
- Saves time, money, gas, etc.
- Informal-not intimidating, approachable
- Creates opportunities to connect with a broader array of residents- not just specific stakeholders

Limitations

- It might not be convenient timing for people
- Some users might not check social media during this time frame
- Users might hold back since screen names are associated with replies
- Not as focused
- Nonresidents may participate
- Feedback might be skewed by season
- Limited to those who use social media outlets and are connected to these accounts

Engaging Citizen Input Processes

Community Mapping

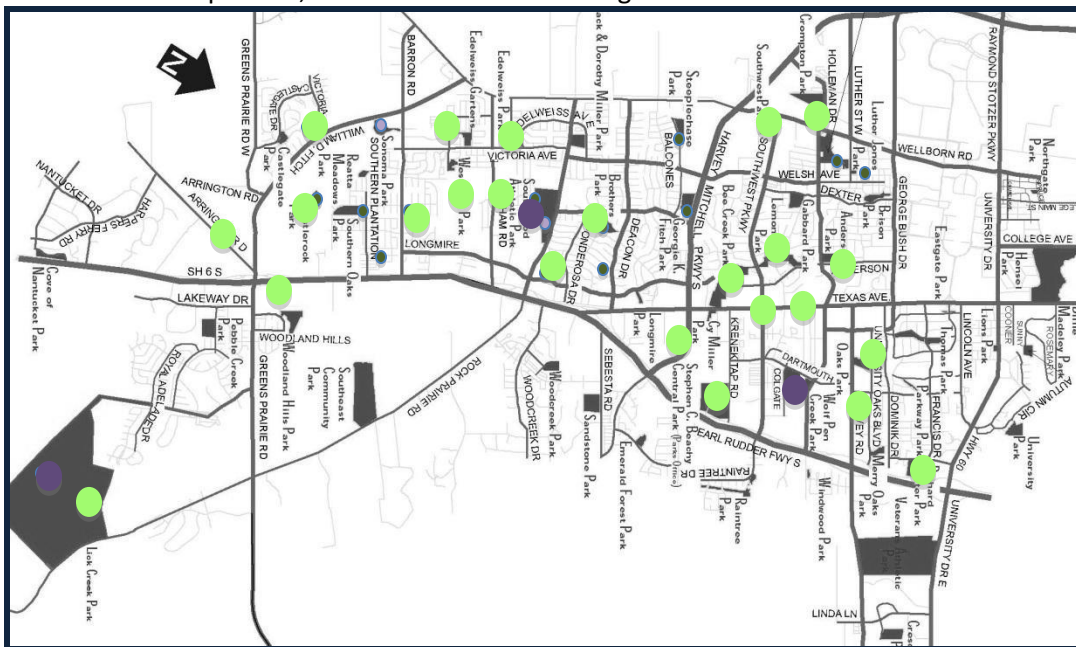
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Goals

- To connect with local citizens.
- To improve communication between parks department representatives and citizens.
- To understand activities citizens participate in at parks and recreation facilities.
- To understand the value of places and spaces to citizens.

Activities

- Welcome
 - Conducted by PARD staff to highlight overall citizen input process, the value of the process, and how the information gathered will be utilized.



- Instructions
 - Review the community meeting mapping activity and remind attendees PARD staff are present to answer questions or discuss parks, facilities, and programs.
 - You have been provided a packet with a short worksheet and two sheets of dots*.
 - A facilitator will confirm attendees can locate key places on the maps.
 - Using the maps on the walls, use your green dots to mark places in the community that you use for recreation and leisure.**

* Dots will be numbered and lettered (e.g., 001) so that data on maps can be correlated with data on worksheets.

** Not limited to city provided places or activities.

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Community Mapping

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- Next, using your worksheet please indicate in general:
 - How you use these spaces and places,
 - What characteristics of places are valuable to your leisure and recreation experience, and
 - What values and meanings do these spaces and places have in your everyday lives?
- Using your three purple dots, please mark three specific places/spaces that are valuable to your recreation/leisure experiences (you can mark a location you previously identified in the first step with green dots).
 - Using the space indicated on your worksheet, please write why each place/space is valuable to you.
- PARD staff and facilitation personnel will be on hand to discuss the places/spaces and recreation and leisure activities with participants and answer questions or provide guidance as they complete the process.

Note: Accommodations will be available for those with disabilities.

Supplies

- Packets for each participant with 50 green dots, 3 purple dots, and worksheet.
- Clipboards
- Pens
- Two 9'x5' maps of the Community with major roads and parks and recreation facilities marked.

Strengths

- Not time consuming
- Informal-not intimidating, approachable
- Interactive

Limitations

- Feedback might be skewed by season
- Some individuals struggle with mapping activities
- Recall bias might exist for which spaces/places participants map

Adapted from:

- *Say Can You See: A Visual Awareness Toolkit for Communities.*
- Brown, G. (2004). Mapping Special Attributes in Survey Research for Natural Resource Management.
- Engaging Cities: Collaborative Mental Mapping.

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Community Mapping

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Step 1

- Please make sure you can identify a key landmark or intersection on the map.
- Below, list the places/spaces in the community that you use for recreation and leisure.
- Explain how/why you use these places/spaces for recreation and/or leisure.
- Please tag each place/space on the map using the **GREEN** dots provided.

Name of Place/Space	How/Why do you use the place/space
A.	
B.	
C.	
D.	
E.	
F.	
G.	
H.	
I.	
J.	
K.	

Step 2

- Using your three **PURPLE** dots, please mark three specific places/spaces in the community that are valuable to your recreation/leisure experiences (you can mark a location you previously identified in the first step with green dots).
- Please indicate below what value each place/ space contributes to your everyday life?

Space/ Place ID	Please indicate what value each Place/space contributes to your everyday life?
A	
B	
C	

