

Having Your Say Part II

Last month I wrote about public engagement, offering some practical tips about how, when and where you can share your thoughts with the Denman Island Local Trust Committee, the body you elected for land use planning.

Since then I attended a workshop on public engagement which inspired me to write more on this topic. Although this event was aimed at local government, I think the challenges and lessons are relevant for all types of community conversations and shared decision-making. I hope this article will be useful to everyone interested in community organizing.

The Simon Fraser Centre for Dialogue sponsored the course: “Beyond the Usual Suspects.” As the name suggests, the focus was on finding ways to broaden public engagement. How do we ensure the quiet voices aren’t drowned out by the loud ones? The minority not silenced by the majority? How can we hear from the people who aren’t comfortable writing letters, speaking at meetings or calling up their representatives? And how can we move towards collective problem-solving, rather than just engaging in polarized debates about who’s right and who’s wrong?

As one elected official said, “I want to hear from the folks in the middle, but they never show up. The only way to engage people is to piss them off.” The instructors reminded us that we do need to hear from angry people (they provide strong arguments on either side of an issue), but we need to resist the urge to give angry voices more weight than calm ones. This isn’t always easy, but we very much need the “folks in the middle” to help provide balance, analyze the big picture and identify possible common ground.

Here are some **recommendations from the course:**

- Identify and research your target audiences, including those who may be unlikely to show up, and think about how to engage all of them;
- Use a mix of consultation techniques, including one-on-one interviews, small-group discussions, surveys, innovative formats such as Open Space and World Café, and formal meetings;
- Invest in providing effective and accessible information about the issue;
- Go out to people as well as inviting people to you – for instance, visit clubs, associations, schools, seniors’ centres, etc;
- Make events accessible by choosing a central location, ensuring the room is comfortable and providing child-care and refreshments as well as support for people with disabilities;
- Ensure meetings feel safe and welcoming by asking all participants to refrain from shouting, insults, cheering and booing, and other potentially intimidating behaviour;
- Offer fun and interactive activities;
- Treat residents as experts;
- Hold focus group sessions specifically for people who otherwise might be excluded (due to practical issues such as disability, or concerns about vulnerability).

I was pleased to note that the Islands Trust follows many of these guidelines, but I know there is always room for improvement.

I believe we – the Island Trust – are fully responsible for how we conduct public engagement. **But I also believe every individual can make a big difference.** There are many ways Denman Islanders can (and do!) foster a community culture of constructive dialogue, respect for diverse views, a culture where consensus and collaboration is possible, where we can live gracefully with our differences and even learn from them. One of my not-so-ulterior motives for writing about this topic is to encourage this culture.

And so I will end with a few requests. To “the usual suspects,” I say: keep leading the way, and keep inviting others to participate. Bring your passion to us, while also helping us provide an encouraging space for dissenting voices.

To “the not-so-usual-suspects,” I say: let us know what could make participation easier for you and don’t ever doubt that your voice is important. Know that as a resident you have valuable information. If you don’t feel motivated because you find yourself “in the middle” on an issue, this is no reason to be quiet, but in fact quite the opposite: this is exactly why your community needs your participation.