

Community Conversations: Minnesota's Changing Demographics

Engaging Younger Generations



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Engaging Younger Generations

part of **Community Conversations: Minnesota’s Changing Demographics**

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Engaging Younger Generations

Trends

As they continue to assume positions as active citizens, taxpayers, local elected officials, and city workers, the “younger” generations (those 44 and younger in 2009) will present Minnesota cities with new opportunities and new challenges. While Generation X (born 1965-1976) and the Millennial Generation (born 1977-1995) share many of the basic values of their parents and grandparents, like every generation before them, they have also been shaped by their own set of experiences and have

developed their own styles, attitudes, and world views that can differ from those of their predecessors.

Of course, like those who came before them, these generations are made up of a vast array of individuals, not all of whom think or act alike, and there are important differences between Generation X and the Millennials. However, as they seek to respond to these generations, both as citizens and as employees, cities will want to be aware of some of the broad generational commonalities that have been documented.

Generation X

1965-1976

Millennials

1977-1995

Generation X and, to a lesser extent, the Millennial Generation, grew up during times of economic prosperity and the “Morning in America” optimism of the Reagan years. On the other hand, members of Generation X are the children of the divorce explosion, and both generations have witnessed the era of corporate scandal and downsizing, environmental degradation, growth of international terrorism, and failure to manage the federal debt. Collectively, these experiences have left them concerned about the future and skeptical of the ability and willingness of organizations, including government, to address the problems they care about.

The younger generations believe that they will have to be responsible for their own economic suc-

cesses and happiness, and are not going to leave their fate in the hands of organizations they aren't sure they can trust. Career success, they believe, will come more from building their own flexible portfolio of transferable skills than from being loyal and “paying their dues” in any one organization. They are highly oriented to technology as a way to get things done and also as a way to connect with others. They are looking to make an immediate impact through the things they choose to become involved with, and are impatient with long-term approaches to making change. These generations value a “balanced” lifestyle—family life and personal fulfillment are as important as career achievement. Gen X'ers are now busy raising families, and the older Millennials are starting to marry and have children.

The younger generations:

- Believe they are responsible for their own economic successes and happiness.
- Won't leave their fate in the hands of organizations they aren't sure they can trust.
- Believe career success will come from building transferable skills.
- Use technology as a way to get things done and to connect with others.
- Look to make an immediate impact through the things they choose to become involved with.
- Are impatient with long-term approaches to making change.
- Value a “balanced” family life and personal fulfillment.

Trend Effect: Civic Engagement

These generations want to be involved, but in different ways than previous generations. They are tired of partisanship and want better discussion and debate about policy issues. They want to be talked with, not at! The Millennial Generation, in particular, is currently more interested in direct service programs delivered by nonprofits than in government policies and programs. Cities, like government at all levels, have their work cut out for them in successfully connecting with these younger citizens. The graphic below lists some suggestions.

Trend Effect: City Employment

Local governments will need to replace a large number of retiring employees in the next few years, and so far, these younger generations aren't attracted to employment in government—they see it as bureaucratic and stodgy. Gen Xer's are more attracted to private-sector employment, and among the Millennial Generation, those wanting to have an impact on their community are more likely to look toward careers in the nonprofit sector. However, it has also been found that they don't know much about government as an employer, and once they learn the realities of local government, many younger workers are persuaded that it can be a good career choice, both to build personal skills and to make a difference.

Tips for connecting with young people

Don't wait for them to come to city hall to discuss city issues! Get them engaged by bringing discussions to the places they gather (e.g., coffee shops, ball games).

Use technology to give them opportunities to connect to city issues and events on their own time frame—web sites, blogs, online discussion forums, etc.

Avoid divisive, partisan-oriented approaches to policy discussion. Emphasize practical and cooperative problem-solving, along with ways to have immediate impact and be action-oriented.

Use interactive dialogue, rather than one-way messages to communicate and connect—keep presentations short around key points, and then open the floor for questions and two-way dialogue.

Demonstrate to these generations that city governments can get things done. Persuade them that volunteering, including serving in local elected office, is a good way to actually make a difference in their community.

To attract and retain younger workers, cities should:

- Start paying attention to the pipeline for city workers in all types of positions, including administrative work, by:
 - Connecting with students of all ages— K–12, undergraduate, and graduate students—to explain city government and its employment opportunities;
 - Building relationships with institutes of higher education to develop degree programs that produce the kinds of workers needed;
 - Telling stories about what city employees actually do—the wide range of skills needed, the opportunity to be involved in significant work right from the beginning, and the impacts one can have on community;
 - Refraining from telling “war stories,” and reframing the job as policy leadership.
 - Getting rid of job announcements that are boring and bureaucratic sounding, and replacing them with notices that are more exciting and attractive.
- Make sure younger workers have access to cutting-edge technology.
- Offer opportunities for significant immediate responsibility and for ongoing professional development.
- Adopt supervisory practices more in line with what younger workers want, including:
 - Independence—less looking over the shoulder.
 - Periodic feedback.
 - Opportunity to receive mentoring from senior employees.
 - A work environment that is fun and stimulating.
- Change city work policies to allow more flexibility:
 - Flex time.
 - Part-time options.
 - Telecommuting.
 - Options for time off for family events and personal pursuits.
- Recognize that these generations don't see themselves looking for lifetime employment; determine how their immediate interests and goals can be aligned with the needs of your city.

These generations want to be **involved**, but in different ways than previous generations. They are **tired of partisanship** and want better discussion and debate about policy issues. They want to **be talked with**, not at!

Putting the Power of Dialogue to Work for your Community

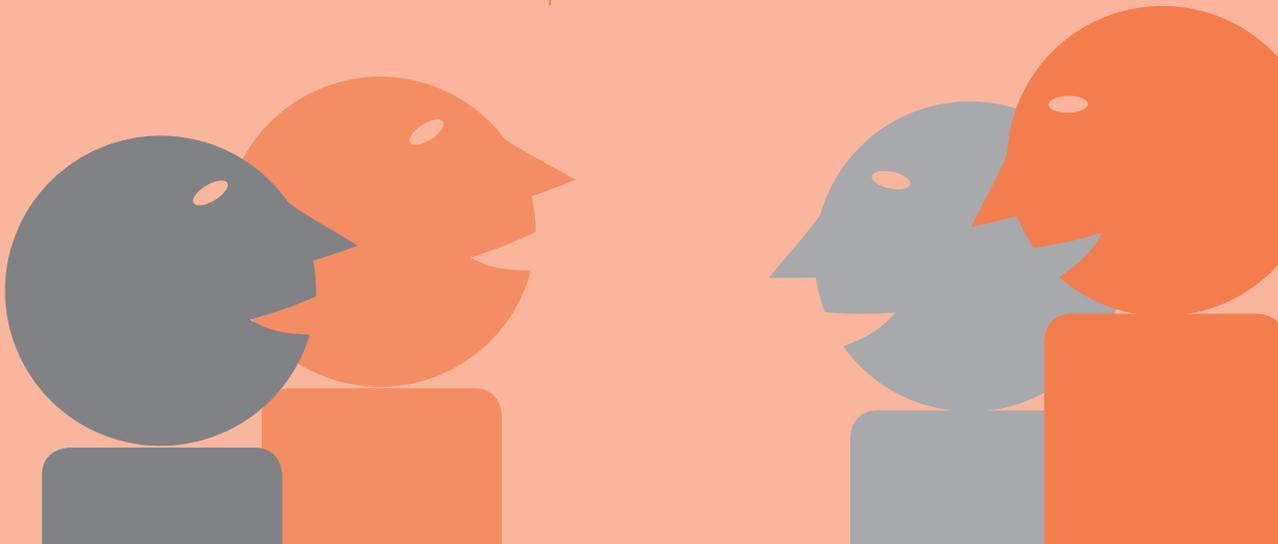
Increasingly, public officials are learning that one of the most effective ways to address challenging community issues is through citizen and stakeholder dialogue. Conducting such dialogues is part of the growing citizen engagement—or “democratic governance”—movement that seeks to tap the insights, energy, understanding, and experiences of “everyday citizens” to address public issues.

Those involved in the democratic governance movement have found that by talking in groups people are more easily able to balance individual needs with the common good. They relearn the civic skills many have lost—the ability to talk, debate, persuade, negotiate, be creative, and find compromise. When citizens with different viewpoints talk to each other to

develop policy recommendations that are rooted in the common ground among them, the participants:

- Learn more about the issues.
- Connect their personal experiences to the policy debate.
- Develop detailed plans and policy recommendations.
- Devote their own time and energy to implementing those action ideas.
- Forge effective working relationships with others, including city elected officials and staff.

This type of dialogue may be very effective when dealing with demographic issues, including meeting the needs of immigrants.



6 Steps to Conducting a Stakeholder Dialogue

Taking a democratic dialogue approach to addressing issues can be made as simple, or as sophisticated, as you like and as makes sense for the issue and the relevant individuals and groups with which you are working. While democratic engagement can take place in a number of different forums, the type of dialogues we are suggesting here work best with a small group—ideally 10 to 12 individuals. They gather to discuss a topic, identify resources, and develop an action plan, and perhaps take responsibility for implementing that plan. If a larger number of stakeholders needs or wants to be involved in the dialogues, the group can be broken down into subgroups. The collective insights of the various groups are then compiled into a common report.

The basic steps to conducting a dialogue include:

1

Identify the stakeholders.

Who is or will be affected by the outcome of this discussion? Who has an interest in it? Who can impact the outcome and the success of any implementation effort? Assess what other local governments have done in this area, including counties and school districts. For most of the issues, almost anyone in your community might have a stake in the outcome, so think broadly.

2

Recruit the stakeholders.

Invite participation by the individuals (or representatives of groups) identified in Step 1. Be careful not to invite just the usual group of community activists. Encourage all groups, including those that may not have participated in city issues in the past, to become involved. Be sure as well that there is good participation and balance by age, gender, economic status, family status, geography, ethnicity, occupation, and so forth. For most issues, you may also want to publish a general announcement inviting anyone who is interested to participate. Consider different ways of contacting individuals in your community, especially younger generations, who may rely upon different technologies for social interaction.

Additional resources on dialogues:

- The Democratic Governance page on the National League of Cities. To view this page, visit www.nlc.org/resources_for_cities, click on “Programs & Services,” and then click on “Democratic Governance.”
- *Smart Democracy: How to Engage Citizens*—a publication available for purchase from the International City/County Management Association at bookstore.icma.org/Smart_Democracy_How_to_Engage_P1241C23.cfm.
- Everyday Democracy is a nonprofit organization that works to help communities engage in successful dialogue. For information, visit www.everyday-democracy.org.
- For more information about community dialogues, contact **Kevin Frazell**, League of Minnesota Cities director of member services, at (651) 281-1215 or kfrazell@lmc.org.

3

Retain a facilitator.

Conducting successful small group dialogues usually necessitates the services of a trained

facilitator. The facilitator takes responsibility for helping the group get through the dialogue, makes sure all participants have a balanced opportunity to speak, leads the discussions toward conclusions, and if appropriate, an action plan. The facilitator does not directly participate in the content of the discussion, offer his or her own personal opinions, or lead the discussion in a particular direction or toward predetermined conclusions. Many organizations today have staff who are trained in group facilitation skills.

If your city doesn't have a trained facilitator on staff, check with your county, school district, institutions of higher education, larger local/regional businesses, or the University of Minnesota Extension Service. Any of these organizations might be willing to contribute a few hours of their facilitator's time to a community dialogue on an important issue. And, of course, you will need to be clear about expectations for the facilitator. Beyond facilitation, will he or she be expected, for example, to type notes, prepare a report, or make public presentations?

4

Establish your meeting times and locations.

City hall can work, but consider an optional location where everyday citizens are more used to congregating—e.g., library, coffee shop, park building, or community center. Be sure the setting is comfortable and can provide enough seating. The setting should also accommodate a group discussion (i.e., seats can be arranged in a circle or some other way that is conducive to a group conversation). Arrange for refreshments. Depending on who is in the group, you may also need to provide for child care.

5

Use this Discussion Guide to conduct the dialogues.

Using the Discussion Guide in Section 3, feel free to modify the questions in a way that seems more relevant to your community or to the group. It is best, however, to keep the questions very broad so as not to lead the discussion into predetermined directions. The idea is to connect a current community issue to the values and life experiences of the members of the group, and to their commitment to becoming involved in addressing the issue.

The Discussion Guide in Section 3 is designed to take the group through several discussions, including:

- Background and personal connection to the issue;
- Consensus-building on what the issue is about;
- Future vision about what can and should be done; and
- Development of an action plan, including agreement on assignment of responsibilities for follow-through.

The introduction on the growing immigrant population (Section 1) is designed to serve as a resource for the discussion process.

It's important that someone take notes to document the dialogues, including an outline of the group discussion, agreement points, action plan, and follow-up responsibilities.

6

Follow through on next steps.

Determine whether completion of the dialogues is sufficient in itself, with the work of implementation to be turned over to others, such as staff, or whether further follow-up discussions and action steps require additional meetings. Also be sure to get evaluations from the participants on the dialogue itself. What worked? What didn't? What could be improved?

With productive community conversations, you can explore the possibilities—and celebrate your successes!

Discussion Guide:

Younger Generations

This guide deals with the topic of engaging younger generations—that is, those of roughly age 44 and under in the year 2009. This topic has two components: general civic engagement in the community and city employment. A dialogue on city employment may have a narrower group of stakeholders that includes current city staff and potential future city employees such as high school and college students. The guide provides two alternative Topic 2 sessions—one related to civic life and the other to city employment issues. You can select whichever seems more relevant to the purposes of your group, or use both.

Begin each session with a reminder of the ground rules for having an effective dialogue:

- Everyone deserves respect.
- Everyone gets the same opportunity to speak and be heard—only one person talks at a time.
- Participants can disagree, but they must do so amicably and without personal attacks.

Discussion Guide: Younger Generations

Topic 1

Interpersonal Understanding

This topic allows the group members to begin expressing their own viewpoints and values to increase understanding among the generations.

- Introduce yourself, including the year you were born, and where you grew up.
- Share one or two stereotypes about your generation, and whether you think they are true for you personally.
- What are your most vivid memories of what society was like when you were growing up? You might want to mention things like key events, what values people had, and how people spent their time.
- What has been your personal experience with technology, both on the job and in your personal life?
- What would you say are the top two values people in your generation hold? Are these values for you personally? If not, what are your top two values?
- What movie, book, or popular song exemplifies your generation and the way it sees the world?

Topic 2

Civic Commitment

Building on the groundwork laid in the first topic discussion, this topic is intended to guide the group into a more in-depth dialogue about the views the different generations have of organizations, including your city, and what it will take to make them want to become involved.

- What organizations do think are most going to impact your future? Do you trust them with your future?
- Specifically, what is your view of the city government in this community?
- What are some of the characteristics you think an organization must display if it is going to win your confidence?
- How likely are you to become or remain involved with the civic organizations in this community, including the city government?
- What are the main barriers to your involvement? What would strengthen your desire to become involved?

Topic 2—Additional (optional)

City Employment

Building on the groundwork laid in the first discussion, this topic is intended to guide the group into a more in-depth dialogue about the views the different generations have of organizations, including the city government, as places to work.

- Compared to all the places a person of your generation might want to work, how does the local city government compare?
- Specifically, how do you feel about the availability of technology and how the city uses it?
- What is best about supervisory practices in the city? What needs to change?
- How would you evaluate the city's work policies—too rigid, about right, too lenient? Why? Is there sufficient flexibility in work schedules?
- How are the opportunities for advancement and professional learning at the city?
- How can we realistically impact things that affect those opportunities for advancement and professional learning, both the positive and the negative?

Topic 3

Action Plan

At this stage the group starts to move from vision and ideals to action!

- What concrete steps do we need to take today, in the short term, to start achieving the vision we have to engage younger generations in our community and/or our city government? What about for the longer term?
- What will each of us here commit to doing?
- Who else needs to be engaged at this point to move our plan forward?

This session should end with agreement about who will write the action plan, with assignments of responsibility for implementation and how the group wishes to review, modify, and commit to that plan.

You may copy pages of this booklet for use in your organization, or you may download them for further customization from the League web site at www.lmc.org/page/1/changing-demographics.jsp.

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Things to Think About: Younger Generations

As your community discusses and plans to engage younger generations, keep the following considerations in mind:

- How well does the current leadership of this city understand members of Generation X and the Millennial Generation?
- Are city leaders willing to make changes necessary to engage these generations?
- What does our city have (amenities, quality-of-life characteristics) to attract and retain young people?
- Think about how our city currently interacts with citizens:
 - Do we seek public input only through traditional methods like public hearings, or do we seek input in ways that are fun and engaging to younger people?
 - Do we hold hearings mainly to persuade citizens to accept what the city has already decided, or are there opportunities for genuine public input, participation, and decision-making? Is as much or more time allowed for dialogue as for presentation?
 - Are we reaching out to meet citizens in places where they are already comfortable gathering such as coffee shops, community centers, churches, and athletic events?
 - Are we involving school-age citizens regularly in city discussions and decisions through youth commissions, youth advisory boards, or other organized methods?
 - Are we using the Internet to inform the public and to ask for their input?
- Does the way in which we conduct city business persuade citizens that we are about getting things done, rather than just talking or arguing?
- Does the behavior we model convince people that serving in city office would be worth their while?
- Think about how we are changing city employment practices to attract the next generation of city workers:
 - Are we reaching out to potential future city workers to convince them that the city would be a great place to work?
 - Are our job announcements oriented to those looking for lifetime civil-service type employment, or do they feature the types of qualities that are attractive to the next generation such as building a personal career, making a difference, and obtaining lifestyle flexibility?
 - Do our employees have access to cutting-edge technology? Are younger employees able to incorporate their social networking habits and technologies into how they do work?
 - Are our junior employees given opportunities to work on projects of significance?
 - Are employees allowed to exercise a good deal of independence?
 - Are employees given periodic feedback, but without too much second-guessing?
 - Are we creating opportunities for career growth through mentoring and professional development such as meaningful internships?

Endnotes

1. Information on civic engagement in this document is from a presentation given by Sean Kershaw, executive director, Citizens League, to the League of Minnesota Cities Demographics Task Force on April 18, 2007.
2. Information on city employment in this document is from a presentation given by Susan Arntz of the International City/County Management Association and Minnesota City/County Management Association Next Generation Initiative to the LMC Demographics Task Force on April 18, 2007. Information about the initiative is available at www.icma.org.



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