

# Authentic Community Engagement Starts from *Within* | BY ALLISON SCHECK

A successful **grass roots** neighborhood engagement program that created a deep level of community trust and buy-in.

**As my dad**, and perhaps your parents, used to say, if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well. I've given many an eye roll to that old expression, but at this point in my life, I'm ready to concede that he was right. We should only make commitments if we are willing to do them wholeheartedly.

Doing community engagement well means getting your house in order so that you have a structure in place internally to coordinate, collaborate, communicate, and respond to the needs of the community.

Before we dig into why an intentional internal structure is important, let me share a little about the city of Wheat Ridge's community engagement program, *Let's Talk*.



## Wheat Ridge, Colorado: Population 32,000

*Let's Talk* is a grass roots neighborhood engagement program borne out of the 2019 Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy that acknowledged a tension in the community between those who wanted to retain the fundamental values central to Wheat Ridge's founding and those who saw change and progress as inevitable. You see, Wheat Ridge is a landlocked suburb of Denver that incorporated in 1969 because its residents did not want to be annexed by Denver or any other community. The Wheat Ridge community of 1969 valued agricultural and large-lot residential land uses, limited sidewalks, and quiet streets.

Over the last two decades, Wheat Ridge has evolved from a "bedroom" community with a stagnant local economy to a vibrant community with a healthy housing market and thriving commercial centers. The community's average age dropped, more strollers were noticeable, and residents began organizing and advocating for sidewalks, bike lanes, and breweries, as well as requesting permission to dramatically alter their residential properties. By 2019, it was widely acknowledged that the city's position had changed since the early 2000s, but the tension was manifesting in unhealthy ways at public meetings. As an example,

residents resorted to name calling, accusing each other of being "pizza-eating, beer-drinking, bike-riding millennials" when sidewalk connections, new roadways, or master plans were discussed.

In 2019, the city council updated the neighborhood revitalization strategy to determine the path forward for this changing community. A key recommendation of the strategy was to implement a grass roots neighborhood engagement program. *Let's Talk* was born!

## Nitty Gritty Neighborhood Engagement

The purpose of *Let's Talk* is to delve into neighborhoods at the hyper-local level to discover the basic issues and opportunities requiring municipal attention and, through the process, create opportunities for residents to engage with and listen to each other. The program breaks the city down into 10 neighborhoods. Each neighborhood sees a four-to-five-month blitz of engagement opportunities within a two-year cycle. All 10 neighborhood engagement blitzes were complete by September 2023.

During these blitzes, neighborhood engagement specialist Ashley Holland asks residents what they love about their neighborhood and where improvement is needed. She takes that feedback to a cross-functional team of employees from across all departments to discuss potential responsive actions that are practical, feasible, and able to address the issues raised. Residents then weigh in on those actions and, based on that feedback, a work plan is created for the neighborhood.

Some of the work plans include big, capital projects like improving collector streets for driving, biking, and walking. Some of the items are policy driven, such as addressing accessory dwelling units and bulk plane. Others are tactical such as expanding the city's Dumpster Days cleanup program, enhancing code enforcement work to keep neighborhoods looking spiffy, and improving communication around potential development projects so that more residents can weigh in.

Overall, more than 1,800 residents got involved in their neighborhood blitzes in the first round of *Let's*

*Talk*, which included 20 surveys and 49 events including open houses, virtual office hours, and park pop-ups. Blitz information, feedback, and work plans can all be found at [whatsupwheatridge.com/lets-talk](https://whatsupwheatridge.com/lets-talk).

## What It Takes to Make the Magic Happen

The key to *Let's Talk* was the collaboration behind the scenes among staff by every department. Before *Let's Talk* launched, we created a cross-functional team dubbed the Community Engagement Taskforce, comprised of team members from each department and lead by Ashley. This team meets monthly to discuss all planning and community engagement efforts across the city, so that feedback is shared, discussed, and coordinated. This team makes sure that the right and left hands are in sync. For example, if a neighborhood blitz produced feedback that a new trail access point to the creek path is desired, this team makes sure this piece of feedback gets into the mix before other decisions are made and a new trail access point is put in a different location. This team ensures that feedback is elevated and that responses to community requests are authentic, realistic, and accurate. In short, this team builds trust and makes sure nothing falls through the cracks.

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## Building Trust

The *Let's Talk* workplan has become an important component of the city's budget process where we align resources to the desires of the community. Again, some of the desires that emerged are beyond the fiscal capacity of the city's typical operating and capital programs. But with

this level of inclusive nitty gritty engagement, we built support for additional funding mechanisms.

A half-cent sales tax for certain capital projects was due to expire in the next year. To accomplish some of the bigger projects requested by residents through the *Let's Talk* program, we asked the community to extend that tax for another 20 years to raise \$75 million. With a small but mighty resident-led "yes" committee and no organized opposition, the ballot measure to extend the tax passed by more than 70% in November 2023. We attribute that success to the *Let's Talk* program, which created a deep level of community trust and buy-in.

Back to my dad's cringy expression that produced many an eye roll from me. Our work for our communities is certainly worth doing, and including robust community engagement into our decision-making process helps us do this work well. **RM**



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# Go “Old School” with Your COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**In an increasingly digital world,  
there is no replacement for  
personal interaction with the  
residents of your community.**

BY IAN M. COYLE, ICMA-CM

I still remember our first Conversations with the County “town hall” like it was yesterday. It was early December 2017, it was snowing, and we held it at a coffee shop in one of our lesser-populated villages.

Exactly one person showed up. That was one more person than our low mark the following year. However, that one person had some questions on county processes. (She was interested in a position and were challenged with civil service testing requirements and in their words “onerous” restrictions). We had a one-on-one, meaningful, fruitful discussion. She received answers to her questions, and I got a wonderfully tasty cinnamon roll and some fresh brewed coffee. A win-win!

Fast forward to today: Livingston County has continuously hosted, with the briefest of pauses during the height of the pandemic, a monthly open community conversation with our residents. This is “old school” community engagement and I recommend you consider trying it in your community if you are not yet doing something of this type. No filters, no agenda, no two-minute limits on public comment, no up-front knowledge of what you might face, etc.

Our Conversations series originated from discussions that the board of supervisors (our governing body) was having, as they





## We get kudos, compliments, concerns, complaints, and everything in between at these meetings. Thick skin is required, but also straight talk and candid commentary.

lamented the lack of public participation and attendance at our regularly scheduled board meetings and public hearings. We rarely get attendees. In years' past, we moved the meetings to different times, but to no avail. The decision was thus made to go directly to the residents in an unscripted, open forum and to move these meetings around the county's 17 towns. Originally, we called these Coffee with the County, and they were held in the mornings, often at an actual coffee shop. We then pivoted to evening meetings, as feedback from residents through the Board of Supervisors was that such a change would lead to more participation (which proved true). After some debate about the change of the name (Cocktails with the County was a close second), we centered on Conversations with the County.

The meetings are simple. They are scheduled through my office with the town supervisor, who chooses the locations, which have included diners, breweries, libraries, parks, restaurants, and, naturally, actual town halls. The meetings are advertised on our website and through social media. We begin at 6:00 P.M. and the format is straightforward. It's just me as county administrator, taking questions and giving updates. I ask the audience in the beginning what is on their mind and what they might have questions about, and then I jot all of those down to

ensure that they get covered. I address those first, then if time allows, I move on to general county updates based on the time of year. These usually include budget updates, capital project news, special projects, information on new programs or expanded services, state legislation impacting the county, etc.

Our most recent discussion included 90 minutes of

respectful dialogue, replete with questions and comments on the following matters:

- The ownership of a municipal airport, the town's challenges in owning it, and inquiries about economic development assistance.
- A status update on the county's center for nursing and rehabilitation (our county-run nursing home).
- Comments on the growing

solar project developments in the county and the impact on agriculture and the look and feel of the community.

- The success of the county's land bank in fixing up a property in the village.
- Main Street funding for building improvements in the downtown area.
- Major projects in development in the county, including our Light Up Livingston Broadband-for-All program.
- Town parks and ARPA funding from the county.
- The status of our countywide emergency medical services program. I've conducted more than

70 Conversations with the County in more than six years, and there are a few takeaways I'd like to share.

**Face time with residents is crucial.** While technology and public engagement software and social media are important tools in the toolbox (in fact, we use them all), there is no replacement for personal, one-on-one, interactive and engaged discussion with your community. There is no like alternative.

**Be prepared for curve balls.** We get kudos, compliments, concerns, complaints, and everything in between at these meetings. Thick skin is required, but also straight talk and candid commentary as well. People don't want to hear you pass the buck, deflect, filibuster, or BS.

**Spread the word about what's on the horizon.** The vehicle of a monthly town hall can be a great opportunity to inform residents about programs and services. An example would be galvanizing

**There is nothing to match how rewarding it feels when an issue is resolved, a problem is mitigated, or a qualm is assuaged.**

public support for a legislative change (or a proposed legislation pushback) on a bill that might have an impact on our county government.

**Take time to educate on the functions of your local government.** Sharing the background and backdrop of our local government operations is another avenue to explore in these engagement opportunities. I usually start each session with a County Government 101 type of primer. I explain the role of county government in New York and the A-to-Z life-cycle services that counties provide, from supporting early intervention and pre-kindergarten special education through public health to long-term care at our public nursing home. You may be surprised at the newfound appreciation

for the work your government does once explained to the public in a relaxed and informal setting.

**Talk tax dollars.** With respect to finances, relaying the value of the tax dollar at these meetings has also been a focus. I do a deep dive and spend time explaining to those in attendance the tax rate, the tax levy, where our dollars go, what the average resident pays, and what they get for that annual payment in terms of services and programs.

**Announce current job openings.** In today's day and age of recruitment and retention struggles, a monthly town hall is also a prime outlet to share notices of employment opportunities and discuss the diversity and breadth of public service


opportunities to potential job applicants.

The Conversations with the County program has been both personally rewarding for me as a county administrator and a successful engagement activity for county government. There is really nothing to match the genuineness of these discussions or how rewarding it feels when an issue is resolved, a problem is mitigated, or a qualm is assuaged. In fact, these town hall sessions have been some of the most meaningful and enriching experiences of my career in Livingston County. **PM**

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# Redefining Authentic and Effective Public Engagement

A closer look at what it takes to be successful

BY ALEX TORPEY

For many of us who work in local government, terms such as *transparency* and *public engagement* come up in nearly every conversation.

In some ways, this is great. Local governments should be much better about these things, and there are a range of benefits to doing so. But in other ways, the terms are so common, and they are so implicitly accepted as “good” without deeper thought, that we tend to spend our time focusing on the *what* rather than the *why*. In doing so, we miss out on the opportunity to ensure that our efforts and energies are actually connected to and explicitly progressing our goals and our community’s needs.

Before becoming a town manager, I was the inspiration for Ben Wyatt’s character on the tv show *Parks and Recreation*. I’m kidding, but it does feel that way. After being elected (nonpartisan) mayor of my hometown at the age of 23 (and then not bankrupting the town with a failed ice-skating rink, for the record) I’ve spent the last 15 years working in and around local government in a range of capacities. I got my MPA and have since spent nearly a decade teaching in an MPA program; working as a manager in several towns; working as consultant with dozens more towns, nonprofits, political candidates, and companies through the business I founded; and my favorite part, participating in late-night and early-morning coffee shop and bar debates with other people who work with and think about this stuff.



Through these experiences, several things have become clear:

1. Most organizations' outreach activities, and the goals and metrics they use, don't actually forward their broader policy, program, or community goals in the way they think.
2. Most poor policy outcomes can be traced to something wrong happening in a "decision-making environment."
3. One of the best and most sustainable ways to improve policy outcomes isn't by pushing on one specific policy lever; it's by improving the space in which information is consumed, shared, and engaged, and where decisions are influenced and made.

It can be helpful to work from shared definitions. Here is the phrase I've been using



**I've worked for elected officials who say, "Thanks so much for the feedback—that was so valuable!" in a council meeting, then insult and deride that person privately after the meeting adjourns. That won't work.**



for some years to try and sharpen our focus when we talk about these things, and it's ultimately the foundation of all the work that I do: *authentic and effective public engagement*. Let's break it down word by word.

#### Authentic

This means that the people doing the work have to actually mean it. They have to personally and intrinsically believe, on some level, that things such as sourcing feedback from others, allowing differing perspectives, and integrating and evaluating new information are good.

Unfortunately, I've worked for elected officials who say, "Thanks so much for the feedback—that was so valuable!" in a council meeting, then insult and deride that person privately after the meeting adjourns. That won't work. If your leaders don't believe that other people can bring valuable insight or perspectives to the table, then the efforts are unlikely to succeed in the

long term. In an ideal world, this might mean people who get involved and run for office intrinsically believe these things. We don't live in an ideal world, you say? Fortunately, these ideas can be discussed with a robust training, team-building, or goal-setting process with your board or governing body, and I have seen a few instances where people did genuinely shift their mindset toward what we're discussing here.

#### Effective

Most of the time, your efforts won't be merely a one-time thing, such as holding a meeting, making records available, or slapping a public comment period on a public meeting like a FlexSeal commercial. Activities that forward your goal of authentic and public engagement need to be evidence-based, measurable, and disciplined. They may be hard to do and will likely take a long time. If people are not committed to organized, strategic work, the efforts are unlikely to succeed in the long term.



#### Public Engagement

This has three key components:

1. **Government learns from the public.** This means that people in the government, including elected and appointed officials and staff, need to actually learn from the public. Yes, collecting data through surveys can be valuable, but it's deeper than that—a true belief and implementation of systems that allows you to source valuable information from public constituencies.
2. **The public learns from the government.** Government is complicated, don't we all know. The moving pieces are hard to understand, even for those of us who regularly read journals and attend conferences. We don't need to be shy about educating the public on how things work or sharing our expertise gained from lived experiences of doing the work that we do.

**We don't always have to accomplish every goal that we have, but we should set our sights high to push ourselves to constantly improve.**

3. **Support of truly interactive spaces.** This can't be a public comment period. It means small, trusted, authentic conversational spaces where people feel comfortable sharing opinions and ideas, discussing with each other, and maybe even, gasp, changing their mind! Think of well-facilitated charettes that many communities conduct during a master plan type of process.

#### Your Mission and Vision

What we've discussed here is basically a local government organization's *mission statement*, meaning it's the mechanism by which we get to our vision, the way that we will travel to a destination. If the vision is the destination we want to get to, the mission is the road we take to get there.

Then what is your organization's vision, really? My argument is that your vision, and one of the most effective ways to invest resources, is to help create something like: A community capable of and actively engaged in making thoughtful, evidence-based, and broadly representative decisions that improve its future.

That's a mouthful. How about this: A more effective and constantly improving decision-making environment. A decision-making environment is the place where (a) individuals; (b) groups, families, organizations; and (c) communities do things such as:

- Consume information.
- Share information.
- Integrate new ideas into existing understanding (or not).

Ultimately, it's a place where decisions are either influenced or made. Your organization's

decision-making environment is the space between needs existing on one end and outcomes happening on the other.

It probably won't ever be perfect. And it may not ever be as positive and wonderful as I'm describing. But that's OK. Part of our responsibility as leaders in the public sector is to be aspirational with our policy, much like our forefathers were several centuries ago. We don't always have to accomplish every goal that we have, but we should set our sights high to push ourselves to constantly improve.

#### In Summary

If you commit to authentic and effective public engagement, and align your public outreach and engagement activities to a clear, community-based vision, and help create a place where great decisions can be ideated, discussed, and made, there should be no limit to what you can accomplish. Or at minimum, you can avoid bankrupting your town from a failed ice-skating rink. **RM**

**ALEX TORPEY** is town manager of Hanover, New Hampshire, as well as the host of the Hanover Happenings podcast, and a graduate professor, consultant, and speaker.





# Using Generative AI for Community Engagement: Why and How

Empowering cities and counties to connect, communicate, and collaborate like never before, Generative AI is the future of community engagement.

BY EYAL FEDER-LEVY

There's a good chance you've heard of Generative AI, which can be used through ChatGPT, MidJourney, or a slew of other cool new AI tools released in the past few years. All of these technologies have grown in popularity like wildfire. In fact, ChatGPT was the fastest consumer technology to reach one million users, which it achieved just five days after its launch in November 2022.<sup>1</sup>

And this popularity has a very good reason. This technology is super powerful, and we've just begun scratching the surface of what it can do for us. In many ways, this is an "iPhone moment"—a point in time where a new and powerful technology is about to change how we do many things.

While this will be true for many areas of our lives, one of the most exciting "low-hanging fruits" is local government work, specifically, community engagement. Generative AI, or "GenAI" for short, has the potential to improve community engagement in ways we couldn't have imagined just a few years ago.<sup>2</sup> And in this piece, I want to explore why—and what that could look like.

## What is Generative AI?

But first, we need to understand what generative AI is. GenAI refers to a class of advanced artificial intelligence models and technologies designed for natural language understanding and generation. GenAI models operate based on deep neural networks and are trained on vast datasets of human language. These models excel at tasks such as text generation, language translation, question-answering, and content creation.

These capabilities can help us do a lot in government,<sup>3</sup> but they are especially well suited to help bridge the two key pains of community engagement:

1. Reaching only the "STPs"—the same 10 people that always show up at every engagement opportunity.
2. Spending endless staff time and resources on creating engagements and analyzing the community input in them.

GenAI-powered translation tools can break down language barriers, ensuring that all community members can participate fully in discussions and activities.

## Practical uses of AI

Here are five practical ways this technology can supercharge your community engagement right now:

### 1. Create Content

One of the key ways that GenAI can improve community engagement is through content creation. Imagine you're part of a community organization, and you want to announce an important event or development. GenAI can be your trusty assistant in crafting compelling press releases and engaging social media posts. It ensures that your message is informative and captures your audience's attention, making them more likely to participate in your community's activities.

### 2. Translate to Create More Inclusive Engagement

In a globalized world, communities often consist of members from diverse linguistic backgrounds.



GenAI-powered translation tools can break down language barriers, ensuring that all community members can participate fully in discussions and activities. This promotes inclusivity and diversity within the community.

### 3. Analyze and Understand Trends

GenAI can analyze and quantify information, helping community leaders understand

trends and patterns within their community. Particularly, it excels at clustering open-ended text data, such as survey responses<sup>4</sup> or discussion forum threads. Community leaders can gain insights into what matters most to their members by identifying common themes and sentiments. This understanding allows for more targeted engagement efforts and the development of initiatives that align with community interests.

### 4. Set Up Online Engagement Websites

GenAI can streamline the process of setting up online engagement websites or platforms for your community. Whether you're launching a new forum, a dedicated website for events, or a community blog, GenAI can assist in designing and populating these platforms efficiently. This makes it easier for community members to access information, connect with each other, and engage with your

organization online. The strategic plan webpage for the town of Nantucket, Massachusetts, USA, is a great example.<sup>5</sup>

### 5. Create Summaries and Reports

GenAI isn't just about collecting data; it's also adept at creating summaries and reports to share the findings with your community.<sup>6</sup> By automating the generation of reports, you can inform your community members about key developments, trends, and insights. This transparent approach fosters trust and engagement, as members are informed about the community's progress and future plans. SummaryGenAI is not just a technological innovation; it's a powerful tool for enhancing community engagement. By creating compelling content, breaking down language barriers, analyzing open-ended text data, setting up online engagement platforms, and

generating informative reports, GenAI empowers community leaders and members to connect, communicate, and collaborate more effectively. As we continue to harness the capabilities of AI, GenAI promises to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of community engagement. Embrace this technology, and watch your community thrive.

### Summary

Generative AI is not just a technological advancement; it's a pathway to more meaningful and inclusive community engagement. By breaking down language barriers, providing insights into community trends, and facilitating easier access to information, GenAI empowers us to connect, communicate, and collaborate more effectively than ever before.

As we continue to explore the capabilities of AI, let's do so with optimism, caution, and an unwavering commitment to inclusivity and ethical practice. The future of community engagement is here, and it's accessible to everyone. Join us in this exciting journey by visiting [zencity.io/contact-us](https://zencity.io/contact-us) and witness how generative AI can help your community thrive. **PM**

### ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup> <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/chatgpt-users>

<sup>2</sup> <https://blog.zencity.io/resources/charting-the-future-cities-and-counties-embrace-ai-with-innovative-policies>

<sup>3</sup> <https://blog.zencity.io/resources/2024-the-year-of-ai-in-government-navigating-the-evolution>

<sup>4</sup> <https://blog.zencity.io/resources/ai-enhanced-community-surveying-pioneering-a-new-era-in-local-governance>

<sup>5</sup> <https://nantucket-ma.civilspace.io/en/c/town-of-nantucket-strategic-plan>

<sup>6</sup> <https://blog.zencity.io/resources/maximizing-the-usage-of-public-engagement-data-in-local-governments>

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# LOOKING AT CONFLICT THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS

## Approaching community engagement with Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation

BY DAVE TEBO, ICMA-CM (RETIRED)

Like most of you, during my career as a local government administrator I have tried to support new and imaginative ways of engaging community residents. The creation of book circles, study groups, research committees, educational seminars, citizen academies, community-wide strategic planning sessions, and online dialogues were all part of my search for the holy grail of active resident involvement in community decision-making. Some of these projects were effective but they usually ended up only impacting a small group of people.

While I do consider some of these creative approaches to public engagement to have been successful projects, when I look back on my 30-year career as an administrator, I am also confronted by the many difficult times I had dealing with the resident engagement issues and conflicts that faced the communities I served.

How often did my ego and insecurities as an administrator keep me from handling community conflict well? How frequently did I view resident challenges as an accusation of my professional management and value rather than an expression of valid disagreement that needed to be heard and understood? Instead

of seeking real engagement, how regularly did I hope no one would show up for meetings? After all, wasn't it my job to keep board meetings conflict free, things running smoothly, and my community out of the glare of media coverage? In retrospect, what an unhealthy view of conflict and community engagement!

My attitude toward and understanding of community conflict and engagement was transformed as I sat in a recent training session introducing me to the principles and practices of Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation (KNV). As the trainers explained, Kingian Nonviolence is an approach to conflict resolution that emerged from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. The curriculum was first codified by Bernard LaFayette, an early follower of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., working with civil rights activist David Jehnsen in the 1980s. The name "Kingian" is representative of a period in history and not just a single individual. The KNV theory and methodology utilizes the foundations of nonviolent

**Looking back, how often did I view resident challenges as an accusation of my professional management and value rather than an expression of valid disagreement that needed to be heard and understood?**

Figure 1

### The Six Principles of Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation

1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.
2. The beloved community is the framework for the future.
3. Attack forces of evil, not persons doing evil.
4. Accept suffering without retaliation for the sake of the cause to achieve a goal.
5. Avoid internal (emotional) violence of the spirit as well as external violence.
6. The universe is on the side of justice.

Source: "The Briefing Booklet: An Orientation to the Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation Program and The Leaders Manual," © Bernard LaFayette Jr. and David C. Jehnsen

and dialectical thinking of Hegel, Gandhi, and Judeo-Christianity, and recognizes the tremendous contribution of a great many civil rights leaders of the time.

### Our Attitude Toward Community Conflict

This KNV session gave me a strong sense that what we need in our local governments is not more innovative structures and technologies for engagement, but a reimagining of the core beliefs guiding elected officials, and residents view and carry out our public conversations and discourse. A reimagining of how we deal with conflict!

How have we lost our ability to see that conflict should be a normal part of life and decision-making? Shouldn't differences in opinion be viewed as natural,

as well as the importance of negotiation, compromise, and yes, even reconciliation with those who might oppose us following disagreement?

Nonviolent public management, as proposed by KNV, is really not much different than what most of us practice every day. We strive to frame issues well so that conflicts can be better understood and resolved. We seek to build community in fair and equitable ways. We attempt to face intense controversial problems with neutral facts, research, and wisdom. I see KNV as supportive for our work and for the ICMA Code of Ethics, offering with it stories of successful nonviolent confrontation with racial discrimination, added emotional resources, inspiration, and tools to increase our resilience as



## In Kingian Nonviolence, conflict is never over until reconciliation takes place and the community is moving forward together.

we face the difficulties of the public arena today. KNV's timeless principles and practices can serve as guideposts for us when we lose our vision or sense of why we got into public service in the first place.

### Courageous Public Management

It goes without saying that our responsibilities must be carried out without violence, both physical and emotional. Yet being nonviolent can be misinterpreted. It does not mean to run away from conflict, hide from it, or hope that it disappears. It means we must face conflict consistently and courageously, with all the positive spiritual, emotional, and intellectual energy within ourselves. A nonviolent approach asks us to not respond in kind, or retaliate against, abusive criticism or violence and be willing to sacrifice for the sake of what we believe to be true. Our job as a nonviolent public manager is to understand conflict as a neutral element that needs to

be managed wisely so it can offer the creative opportunity for improving relationships in our communities. Especially in today's contentious public square, we also need to be keenly aware of how we as appointees, our elected officials, and our residents may engage in emotional violence when relating to each other. Name calling, shouting down, or failing to listen to an opponent is not providing an opportunity for true engagement.

### A Framework for the Future

KNV offers a fundamental shift in how political change is usually made in our communities. Rather than an "us versus them" adversarial approach, or trying to discredit and vilify opponents, there is an attempt to work in such a way that would potentially turn our opponents into allies and win general support from the community. Our commitment goes beyond just conflict resolution to reconciliation of relationships.

In KNV, conflict is never over until reconciliation takes place and the community is moving forward together. Tenet 4 of the ICMA Code of Ethics asks us to serve the best interests of all community members in a fair and equitable manner. I believe the KNV curriculum and Dr. King's definition of community building can inspire and support these efforts. In his 1958 book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, King uses the Greek term *agape* to describe how he was able to continue to seek community with those who were firebombing his home or burning his churches. For him, *agape* means love in action, not a weak or passive love. It seeks to preserve, create, and insist on community even when others seek to break it. *Agape* is a willingness to sacrifice in the interest of community and a willingness to go to any length to restore community. It is a love in which the individual does not seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. It is a neighbor-regarding

concern for others that seeks to discover the neighbor in every person it meets. *Agape* is a redeeming good will for all humans and it attempts to see goodness even in our enemies.

### Our North Star

Experienced and practical local government leaders may think the KNV approach is too idealistic and does not adequately consider the political difficulties facing an appointed administrator or the rough and tumble world of today's polarized communities and frenzied social media environment. In response, I would like to end with a story shared by Kazu Haga in his brilliant little book, *Healing Resistance*, written about KNV Conflict Reconciliation. The story recounts how slaves walking north toward freedom along the underground railroad would find the North Star each night as their guide. They were not walking to the North Star specifically—it was millions of miles away—but they knew if they kept moving toward the star, they would eventually get to the freedom they desired. Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation can serve as our North Star as we work toward it every day, holding on in faith to that famous phrase popularized by Dr. King: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." **RM**

Figure 2

### The Six Steps of Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation

1. Information gathering.
2. Education.
3. Personal commitment.
4. Negotiation.
5. Direct action (not necessary if negotiation is successful).
6. Reconciliation.

Source: "The Briefing Booklet: An Orientation to the Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation Program and The Leaders Manual," © Bernard LaFayette Jr. and David C. Jehnson



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