



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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Can We Just be Civil? | OAS Episode 22 | Nov. 23, 2017

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host Gene Rose.

“Our American States” took its first road trip, as we wanted to explore the subject of citizen engagement. We traveled to Fort Collins, Colo., to witness a town hall community forum. In this episode, we’ll listen to parts of that forum and get some reaction from the meeting’s host, Representative Joann Ginal (D). Later in the program, we’ll talk with Angela Andrews at the National Conference of State Legislatures, to learn more about trends in town hall meetings and find out why they are an important part of a legislator’s communication toolbox.

To set the backdrop, we arrive on a Saturday morning a few days before Thanksgiving, with the temperature in the low 40s, and the Colorado State Rams kickoff in a new stadium less than three hours away. We’re surprised to see about 70 people in a cramped room at the local library to hear presentations and to listen about transportation issues.

Ginal: Welcome to one of our legislative meeting forums. There are still seats down in the front. (background chatter). If you’re looking for a seat, I’m sorry you didn’t get here early enough to sit in the back, so there are a few seats down here...

Gene: According to the host, Representative Ginal and her local colleagues, this type of turnout is common. In fact, they would argue that for the aforementioned reasons, the turnout on this day is lower than normal. But for several years, longer than Representative Ginal has been the area’s state legislator, people have flocked to these community forums.

Ginal: We have an esteemed panel today where actually two of our panel members came up from Denver and one is local, and...

Gene: At the town hall, Representative Ginal has asked CDOT, the Colorado Department of Transportation, the State Rail Association and an official with the local transportation agency to give 10 minute presentations each, and the rest of the 90-minute session is set aside for questions from the audience. Representative Ginal does not pontificate about her opinions on transportation. Instead, she chooses to listen.

Ginal: If anyone has any of those index cards and they have questions, can you move them all towards Senator Covalis? I have a couple of questions that came down from folks and so I want to address a couple of these. Where on the priority list is transportation for seniors and individuals with disabilities? For many with mobility issues such as wheelchairs, dementia, oxygen use, these options are severely limited.

Gene: After the forum, we talked with Representative Ginal.

Ginal: We have been voted in by the people that this is part of our job, to make sure that they're informed as to what's going on, not just at the state level, but having all the info, because at the state level I'm working with county commissioners, I'm working with the City of Fort Collins; so it's not just what's going on at the state. That's a great thing and great knowledge for people to have up here. They also need to know what's going on locally. And we do it and I think it's the dedication of the legislators that are here. But I think it can be replicated.

Gene: So it seems to me the audience was given some pretty detailed information, yet people seem to get it and to ask intelligent questions about that. Is that a common thing that happens in your meetings?

Ginal: I would say yes. There are a lot of very informed people here, informed people that want to see positive change, and those questions, it's not like they haven't been brought up before, but some are very aware of it, some it's new information, but it's very valuable information for them.

Gene: And you continue these forums during session too?

Ginal: Actually, this was the exception where we decided we'd have them September, October and November, because usually we don't have them except during session. It's kind of an addition for the fall programs that we've put on. The first one was behavioral health and the stigma of behavioral health in September.

It's teaching our community to understand why certain things aren't moving as fast as they want to see them move, or why we're not getting the monies, or whatever the issue; we want to address that and I think it really helps having this constructive dialogue with community members and with some experts.

Gene: So these are new, these fall meetings?

Ginal: Yes. Now I have my own. I have a coffee the first Saturday morning of every month and I have it at one of the local coffee shops. I don't get this kind of crowd because it's just one of us and not all three of us, or myself and a senator, however it turns out. Usually the three of us are at all of these.

We also, on the second Saturday of every month, have a community town hall, and that's saying what we've done down at the session and these are during session because we're talking about what we've done during this last month, what bills have come through our committees, what bills are coming through, and just take questions and keep the community informed about what's going on down at the capitol.

Gene: It takes dedicated legislators to make something like this happen. Obviously you have an informed community, but you also have people willing to listen to citizens. Right?

Ginal: Absolutely. I think that's one of the key points is it's not us preaching or talking at these people; we want them engaged because we want to hear what their issues are and address those. Maybe they've got great ideas that we're overlooking.

I just had a meeting a couple of nights ago and they set it up in the same fashion as we had this particular forum. It's kind of like okay, there's a table in the front with the three experts talking to an audience.

Usually I like, if I'm going to have my own community forum or my own coffee... I like a circle because I think that's a way that is inclusive of everybody and you're not talking at people; you're talking with people; and to me that's very important.

So these are more formal. Coffees individually are less formal and are another way that people can get to their legislators and that we can understand what they may have a problem with, what they may have an issue with, what bills they object to, what bills they support, and also how they can help us down at the state legislature.

Gene: After this short break, we'll talk with an expert on legislators and their use of town halls and other devices to engage with citizens.

Break

Gene: So we're talking now with Angela Andrews, a program director with the Legislative Staff Services Program at the National Conference of State Legislatures. Angela, welcome to the program.

Angela: Thank you for having me.

Gene: So let's start with this. What types of town halls are legislators holding across the country? What types of tools are they using to work with citizens and get their opinions?

Angela: You see legislators holding what I call kind of the usual ways to engage and have conversations with citizens, typically through the regular town halls where the legislator sits or stands at the front of the room and it's usually in the evening and citizens are invited to participate.

There are also the one-on-one meetings between a legislator and a constituent or stakeholder. You'll hear a lot of legislators talk about what they call "coffee and conversation" where they find a coffee house or Starbucks in the district and invite their constituents to come and chat with them.

And even some hold office hours, which is kind of a different play on the coffee and conversation, where they will hold office hours for a few hours in their district at maybe a local library or another public institution where citizens can come and talk to them about the issues they're interested in, difficulties they're having with a state agency, or anything else on their mind.

But you're starting to see a lot of other changes in how legislators are holding, if you will, town halls and how they engage and talk to citizens. Some of the interesting things that legislators have been involved in doing are something that's likened to a listening tour where a legislator or a group of legislators go out across the state or even in the district and basically hold a meeting where they want to hear feedback from constituents, from businesses, from different stakeholders, from the community about issues affecting them.

For the past two or three years, the Massachusetts Senate led by the Senate president, the majority leader and the minority leader have had bipartisan listening tours across the state of Massachusetts. They're called Commonwealth Conversations and they have these listening tours in each region of the state. All senators are invited to participate and ask their community members to participate too.

Another thing we've seen around legislators creating a dialogue and engaging constituents and their citizens is for them to participate in what is maybe already happening. So, for example, there was an effort in West Virginia – it's called the What's Next West Virginia – kind of round table discussions/dialogues and the framework was developed by the Center for Civic Life in West Virginia. It was basically an opportunity for communities to come together and have conversations about the economic future of West Virginia. So this dialogue and this type of engagement wasn't initiated by legislators; it was really initiated by other organizations, but legislators were notified and invited to participate in the process and just kind of hear what citizens were saying in regards to the economic future of West Virginia, as well as other issues facing the state.

Another thing you've seen in terms of beyond the town halls with citizen engagement is where legislators engage in what they call tele town halls. This is really an opportunity instead of having kind of a face-to-face meeting where there's a conversation and essentially a town hall that happens on the phone lines. Citizens are invited to participate and can ask legislators questions after the legislator kind of gives brief remarks. You've seen this happen in the Washington House; I think the Washington Senate does it. I'm also aware that there are members in Oregon that have done it too.

So there are a few different ways legislators can engage in dialogue and conversations with their constituents. We've also seen some other, to wrap this up, a few other creative things legislators have done. There's another legislator in Massachusetts that has monthly art galleries in his office and displays art from his local constituents. So this is kind of a way to connect members to members of the art community and the cultural economy.

We've seen legislators participate in health fairs, do job fairs or help organize job fairs for their district. We even know where legislators put together ice cream socials and really take the time

to visit the senior centers and help organize events that promote the community and strengthen the community as well.

Gene: And so what is a good definition of citizen engagement?

Angela: It's a thoughtful and civil discussion of sometimes divisive topics that happen between elected officials and their constituents. Citizen engagement can really be thought about as where all viewpoints are heard, all participating parties listen. And really the end result is to help identify a common ground and good solutions. So it's really an opportunity for all viewpoints to be discussed and heard and a space where common ground can be formed.

Gene: So Angela, what other trends are you noticing in terms of legislators connecting with citizens?

Angela: One of the trends I've seen is legislators want to have better and deeper conversations with citizens. So while we've seen a lot in terms of active talks a lot and showcase kind of a wide array of activities that legislatures and legislators are engaging in, there's also this trend in citizen engagement with a focus on the process.

So if one is holding a town hall meeting, what does the process look like? How are citizens going to engage with the legislator? How are they going to engage with each other? How is the conversation going to be handled? So that's process.

A focus on outcomes: what is the outcome of the conversation? Is it just for listening and hearing? Does the legislator have to make a decision? What are the purpose and the outcome of the engagement of the town hall, of the listening tour, of the meeting?

There has also been a focus on roles. Oftentimes I've seen where legislators are the convener and the facilitator and the issue expert. But I've also seen it where a legislator will convene a meeting with citizens and step into the facilitation role, but bring in issue experts to talk about health care, to talk about transportation, so that the legislator can listen and help facilitate the dialogue. So there is a trend in thinking about the roles of each person involved.

There's a trend in thinking about locations and where is the best location for a meeting to be held. Is it the public library? If you're trying to engage and talk to millennials and young families, is it doing something at a microbrewery or a local park? And also the times – if you're trying to go beyond the usual suspects and trying to maybe engage young families in a conversation, or millennials, maybe you would do something on a Saturday morning where young families can bring their children with them and not have to find a babysitter for an evening meeting.

The other thing that I've really noticed too is just in terms of what I call logistics in trends and kind of citizen engagement, and again going back to the process and outcome – just thinking in terms of how the room will be set for the conversation. Legislatures are very formal places. As we know on both the floor of the chamber and in most committees, there's a dais where the legislators sit and then a space for citizens to sit, and I've seen instances where legislators try to get out from the dais so they're talking more one-on-one and at the same level with citizens.

There was a former legislator from Ohio that had what he called district dialogues and when he put these district dialogues together, instead of having a meeting set up where it was just chairs

facing the front of the room toward the speaker, he would set it up so that the chairs were in a circle, so everybody faced each other. That was really an intended purpose to create a safe space for dialogue.

Gene: For state legislators... there is such a wide disparity in the size of their districts, so they have to use different tools. For example, in New Hampshire they have hundreds of legislators and then you go to a state like California where a senator has more constituents than a member of Congress. So there has to be a different set of tools for people to use in order to reach their constituents. Is that correct?

Angela: You're absolutely correct. The diversity of legislative districts across the states is vast and you had mentioned the comparison between New Hampshire and a California state legislator. So in California typically, as I understand it, there's a staff member or a team of staff dedicated to these constituent or citizen events – they typically classify those as outreach events. And that would take on a different feel than what a New Hampshire legislator would do in terms of the minimal amount of resources a New Hampshire legislator would have. The number of people the legislator represents is very small, so it's very localized and community oriented in terms of the resources.

What the legislator puts together in New Hampshire is kind of, if you will, a one man or one woman show in terms of how the legislator organizes the event vs. where a legislator in California and other states that are big-staff states or where legislators have large districts, there's probably a staff member or a team of staff helping in terms of organization, outreach, marketing, the tools needed to help get the job done. So it varies across the country too.

Gene: And over the course of the last 12 months or so, we've seen congressmen, congresswomen holding town halls across the country where the crowds have been angry and created what I might call a dangerous situation. Are we seeing this at the state level too where state legislators are a little concerned about safety when holding town halls?

Angela: There is heightened tension. Citizens are angry because they feel like they're not being heard and there seems to be a lot of mistrust with elected officials. So I think legislators recognizing that tensions are high can step into situations like that being prepared, but also working toward having a civil dialogue with citizens at these types of meetings.

Ways to do that are really actively listening to citizens' viewpoints so they can feel heard, and also being curious about why citizens have maybe a different view than them; asking the why – why is the view different; legislators modeling the civility and the civil behavior that they'd like to see. So that can lead to maybe more productive meetings and defusing tension when it gets heightened.

Gene: You talked to us and gave us great information about the trends that you're seeing legislators using for town halls. What are you hearing from legislators just in terms of citizen engagement now? More or less, or are you hearing anything about the level of citizen interest?

Angela: One of the challenges I've heard from legislators that have sustained citizen engagement practices is that they feel as if the challenge is trying to go beyond the term we've coined "the usual suspect." So those that have sustained practices, whether it's a monthly town hall meeting

or a monthly caucus meeting... In Hawaii, for example, they have the Keiki and Kupuna caucuses that focus on children's issues and senior citizen issues. And the challenge sometimes within these spaces for dialogue and engagement is really working to go beyond those that engage on a monthly basis.

So legislators tend to be challenged on how they move beyond their circle and really get all in the community to be engaged. Legislators that I've talked to are trying hard and really recognize that the millennials are a driving force in civic life. So how can you modify your engagement practices and strategies to engage a younger generation that maybe has a desire to be engaged in civic life and in civic issues, but maybe don't have the time in the evenings to do that, maybe don't see the value in face-to-face. So legislators have tried a few different things in terms of trying to engage millennials through social media or online platforms to have these conversations and dialogues.

Another one of the challenges we know of, and I talked about this before, is just in terms of challenges of legislators in terms of resources they have to put on these meetings, their skill level in terms of facilitation. Some legislators are really naturals in front of an audience and can really capture conversation and find common themes, while others, that's just maybe not within their skillset.

The other challenge is just the lack of time. So while constituent engagement and citizen engagement is a nice thing to do, it's great in terms of strengthening ties within your community and democracy and it's really important for legislators to understand the values and opinions of the people that they represent, it just sometimes falls on the bottom of the to-do list and it doesn't sometimes become the priority. And that's understandable given all the demands on a legislator's time.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." As a reminder, you may subscribe to this podcast on iTunes or Google Play. As we approach our one-year anniversary of this podcast, we encourage you to express your opinions and leave us a review on your favorite platform.

Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.