It’s a challenge to engage with your constituents when everyone’s shouting.

**BY LARRY SCHOLER**

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “town hall meeting”? If it involves explaining some controversial legislation, I’m guessing you feel some combination of anxiety and dread.

You may have stood before angry constituents in a packed gymnasium, trying to answer questions or respond to their concerns, only to be drowned out by the crowd’s reactions. In those situations, some legislators have questioned their physical safety and wondered whether the presence of uniformed or undercover security personnel would help or hurt.

Attendees come in the hope of sharing their views, of getting questions answered or even of influencing policy decisions; often, they leave disappointed on all counts. Some legislators may hesitate to share their perspectives if they fear a crowd will turn on them, and some constituents may feel the same way, resulting in incomplete and even inaccurate information about constituents’ views.

If legislators want to serve their constituencies and support legislation that resonates with their own beliefs, the current iteration of the town hall meeting isn’t quite doing the trick. Many legislators feel that at these events they hear only from those with enough self-confidence to speak in front of a large, sometimes angry group, those willing to risk the ire of the crowd if they ask a question or voice a concern that isn’t popular with those who showed up.

Here are three ways you can hear from more constituents in more productive ways.

1. **Know Who You Represent.**

   Legislators certainly know the boundaries of their districts, but effective public engagement means “mapping” districts in different ways: learning where your constituents assemble, what events they attend, what organizations they support, what sources of information they rely on.

   Constituents, for example, benefit when legislators regularly visit a specific media outlet—a weekly radio show, for example—for a conversation driven by voter concerns. A
trusted and neutral third party (the host) can foster mutual respect by keeping the conversation on track and safe for all points of view to be expressed.

Face-to-face meetings or encounters at popular hotspots, like farmers markets or cultural events, can give legislators a better understanding of what the public is thinking. For one thing, attendance at these events exposes the legislator to a broader array of constituents than those who self-select to show up at a massive town hall meeting with a single microphone. Small-group discussions often are more appealing to both the speaker and the listener.

2. Know Your Purpose.

We know legislators are supposed to talk to constituents, but an effective public engagement strategy should include a clear agenda and a set of objectives for every event you conduct. Ask yourself: What are we here to accomplish? What do we want to share? What do we want to learn? How do we want to respond to the information we hear? The answers to these questions can help inform the meeting’s agenda and its design—how the discussion happens and how decisions are made.

Consider using social media, your website, flyers and other means to let the public know what to expect at your meetings—the topics for discussion, format, their role, plans for next steps and so on.
10 Ways to Boost Engagement

To engage constituents in meaningful ways, consider these ideas suggested by seasoned legislators:

1. Be genuine. Follow your passion, instincts and core beliefs.
2. Be an active listener. Emphasize listening over speaking.
3. Keep it simple. You don’t have to start big. Keep your plans practical and doable. Some of the most successful practices are low-cost, no-frills conversations.
4. Pick a hot topic. Embrace controversy—these hot topics consistently draw the most people.
5. Get help. Concentrate on your role in the meeting. Use available people on your staff or in your community to help.
6. Go where the groups meet. Take the guesswork out of organizing and promoting a meeting. Participate with your neighborhood or civic association or similar organization.
7. Connect to key stakeholders. Hold richer, more productive conversations by occasionally meeting with small-business owners, school superintendents or others with common experiences or professions.
8. Bring in experts. Simplify complex topics by bringing in experts to help frame and clarify the issues.
9. Work as a team. Work with other legislators when meeting constituent groups. As a delegation, you’ll hear the same stories, but each of you can emphasize your own expertise and divide up the resulting work.
10. Use social media. Facebook, Twitter and other platforms can reach a vast audience that might never attend in-person meetings. Be sure to respond to constituent comments to make it a meaningful discussion. —Angela Andrews


Besides finding a suitable meeting space, legislators need to delegate specific roles to staff and professionals, including:

- Greeting guests and finding out what they are interested in to help maintain contact with them after the meeting ends.
- Working with reporters and media outlets to ensure their needs are met.
- Providing subject matter expertise in response to questions beyond a legislator’s knowledge.
- Capturing constituent concerns that cannot be fully addressed during the meeting.
- Finding a neutral facilitator who can focus on the process of the meeting and ensure all participants are respected.

Delegating these tasks can allow legislators to focus on sharing their perspectives on the issues of the day and listening to their constituents.

Lawmakers who lack the resources or staff to carry all this out can take baby steps. Start with a town hall the way you’ve done it before but dis-
tribute a printed, defined agenda to keep you focused. Add different formats as you gain team members. If the purpose of your gathering is to gain an understanding of constituents’ viewpoints and convey information back to them, then the venue must be appropriate. Conversation held around a single table, in a smaller group, with the help of a facilitator who keeps the group focused on its agenda and mindful of its discussion agreements, could yield far better results than a large, loosely organized gathering.

Research conducted by the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona suggests a strong link between “deliberative democracy,” which emphasizes discussion rather than speeches, and a more “civil discourse,” in which participants feel comfortable sharing their views, even if they are unpopular or not widely held.

Ultimately, your constituents expect a lot from you—and they should. It’s your job to respond to their concerns. But, just as constituents have a legitimate need to feel heard, and see their concerns addressed and questions answered, legislators have a legitimate need to feel safe, whether security personnel play a role at public meetings or not. In the end, we’ll satisfy constituents’ and legislators’ needs only if we can change the conversation.

Capturing the College Vote

S tudents living on college and university campuses rarely make the effort to vote. Only 18 percent voted in the 2014 midterm election, compared with 37 percent of the total population.

How do we engage them?

Although most college students aren’t thinking much about property taxes, public pensions, long-term care and the other concerns that drive their elders to the polls, there are plenty of other issues—increasing tuition rates, the minimum wage, clean water—that many students do care about.

Here are a few ways to increase college students’ interest in state government and strengthen the connection between you and any campus in your district.

1. Speak their language.

Learn how students engage with one another and how they stay informed. What are their social media habits? Are they on Instagram? Snapchat? Fifty-six percent of millennials get their local news through Facebook, and 88 percent of them get at least some news from social media, according to the American Press Institute.

Simply put, social media is no longer just social. It long ago stopped being just a way to stay in touch with friends. It has become a way of being connected to the world generally: to send messages, follow channels of interest, hear news, share news, talk about it, be entertained, stay in touch.

Encourage students to connect with your website. Talk about the issues they care about. Tell a story about your own college experience and how state politics affected you at the time. Students want to interact with and follow people who are genuine, people they can relate to.

2. Clarify without talking down to them.

Research shows Americans know and understand little about our system of representative democracy. To engage with students from all levels, spend time with the general student population, not just the political science students. Talk with political science professors about conducting a mock legislature, or some other activity, to show how government works.

Help students see beyond party labels. Counter their skepticism of politicians’ motives by demonstrating how getting them involved is more important to you than getting their vote. Talk about some of the universal values lawmakers, regardless of party, stand for. Go to campus events—football game, a musical, a speaker series. Become a familiar face and show you support their interests.

3. Register them to vote.

Before college students can vote, they must register. If they haven’t done that in their home state, they can do it in the state where they attend college, as long as they have a temporary or permanent residence there. Some schools have student-organized “voter access” committees to increase turnout by providing information on registration requirements.

Talk to administrators about what they might already be doing to encourage registration and voting, then consider what else could be done. Several organizations offer resources that can help you do this, among them the American Association of University Women, the Campus Vote Project and the Campus Election Engagement Project.

And if you really want them to vote, not just register, encourage them to sign a pledge. A recent study of college students in Colorado and Pennsylvania found that those who pledged to vote were more likely to actually do so than those who didn’t. “Overall, pledging to vote increased voter turnout by 3.7 points among all subjects and 5.6 points for people who had never voted before,” researchers concluded. Also, detailed data on local and absentee student voters are available in the first-of-its-kind “National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement,” from Tufts University.

4. Learn the tax law.

The vast majority of private and public universities and colleges are 501(c)(3) tax-exempt educational organizations prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in any political campaign on behalf of a candidate for elective office. Violators can lose their tax-exempt status and be hit with certain excise taxes.

The activities and expenditures allowed depend on the circumstances. Activities to encourage participation in the electoral process, such as presenting public forums, publishing voter education guides and conducting get-out-the-vote drives, are not prohibited, if conducted in a nonpartisan way.

—Anna Smith, former NCSL intern