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Developing Relationships with Municipal and County Officials: Activities and Actions for Partnerships

As a Partnership, identify advocacy needs and review your priorities, for example:

- Bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly routes through towns/neighborhoods.

Invite municipal and county officials to a Partnership meeting to:

- Educate them about the bicycle and pedestrian goals within their community.
- Find out where they stand on your priority issues and what is important to them. What are their priorities? What do they need from you?
- Provide advice regarding other persons or organizations with whom you should be linking.
- Find out if there are existing ordinances regarding zoning issues or environmental concerns.
- Have a dialogue regarding their perspective on physical activity and community health in relation to bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly routes.

Train Partnership and community members on “how to advocate.”

- Gather and disseminate contact information and send a “practice” e-mail, telephone call or letter to town and county officials.
- Do these officials prefer to be contacted at home or work, by e-mail or by telephone?
- How and where do your Partnership members prefer to be contacted?

Put municipal and county officials (Selectpersons, Town Managers, City Council members, County Commissioners) on your mailing lists for minutes. Be strategic about how you use these folks, e.g., no grunt work please, but have them hand out awards, use them in photo opportunities, ask them to help you with describing financial impact in a positive light, etc.

Identify and cultivate relationships with community opinion leaders and “influence” leaders, i.e., business leaders; political donors; chambers of commerce; Rotary, Lions, Elks, Knights of Columbus, Masons, Grange members; Volunteer Fire Departments; Women’s Auxiliaries to previously mentioned male membership organizations; faith communities.

Sponsor a legislative breakfast to discuss health issues... feature local legislators. Make sure key opinion leaders and members will be there to ask questions, etc.

Talk to local papers about reoccurring Partnership articles (twice/month) regarding Partnership activities/priorities – have a reporter or someone from the editorial staff in the Partnership or on a Committee.

Keep Partnership/community members informed of priority issues and progress on activities.



Developing Relationships with Municipal and County Officials: Activities and Actions for Partnerships (continued)

Relationships with Municipal and County Officials: What are the challenges?

The municipal or county official is:

- Your relative
- The person you least liked in high school
- Your sister's best friend
- Someone you ran against for the position
- New in town, from "away"

Relationships are complicated. Don't pretend that conflicts don't exist. Figure out how to work within or around difficult persons or organizations to accomplish your goals.

Every community has people with a variety of agendas, personality quirks and social histories.

Distinguish clearly between personal conflicts and community tensions. Not all stressors are personal or individual. Take the pulse of the community, know when you are wading into undertow.

You cannot expect meetings to be "safe spaces." If you say it, expect to own it and be accountable.

How do you create credibility? Who should be the messenger?

What are the concerns and priorities of municipal or county officials? What is important to an elected official vs. one who is appointed to a position vs. someone in a career or staff position? Knowing what they value will help you pitch to them effectively because you will already know at least some of the answers to "what is in it for me?"

Know your facts, be organized, be knowledgeable about the financial implications of what you are requesting, understand and design your efforts to work within the existing decision-making process. Figure out where your target is (physically and psychologically), how to reach them where they are and identify strategies to bring them around to your perspective.

Use the intimacy of small town communities to your advantage. You already know most of the people with whom you need to work. This is an opportunity to talk with them about something you care about that will help make their community a more desirable and pleasant place to live.