PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN RURAL AGING COMMUNITIES

By

AMY E. DENKER

A REPORT

submitted in partial fullfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF REGIONAL AND COMMUNITY PLANNING

Department of Landscape Architecture/Regional and Community Planning
College of Architecture Planning and Design

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2014

Approved by:

Major Professor
Katherine Nesse

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ABSTRACT

Public engagement in rural, aging communities is often an after thought when creating plans, strategies, or projects in these communities. Initiatives that focus specifically on interacting with aging ruralites through new media is almost non-existent. However, engagement through web-based forums or social media is a growing trend. At the same time, older people have proven that they do not use the internet or social media as frequently as younger generations. To bridge the gap of inexperience with online forms of engagement, I investigate whether educational components introduced through traditional face-to-face forms of public engagement can increase the participation of older residents.

To test this, I introduce social media and online engagement to older adults through an educational presentation at a public meeting in Council Grove, Kansas, in cooperation with the Flint Hills Regional Council. I monitored social media and online websites connected to the public meeting prior to and after the meeting to track changes in engagement that occurred due to the meeting.

Though there was little change in engagement on the two websites I monitored, the survey results suggest that the people at the meeting appreciated the introduction and did have some familiarity with the internet and the online engagement environments. Unfortunately, this research does not definitively answer the question asked. It suggests that further education presented in future meetings may increase online engagement when implemented at a larger scale.

DEDICATION

To my parents, you have been my guiding light and patient believers.

Special thanks to my Committee, Katherine Nesse, Gary Stith, and Soo-Hye Han, for taking the time to help me through.

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Project Dilemma

Online engagement has had a mixed reception of usage by different urban and rural regions. Urban regions have responded better to online engagement usage compared to their rural counterparts, and have led the development of this form of civic conversations. Online engagement can provide communities with a versatile avenue for deciding community decisions, but rural communities may not be properly educated on how to access them. Planners and civic leaders should know how to properly train their residents if they choose to use online engagement. Unfortunately, rural leaders have to overcome barriers to utilizing online engagement in their communities.

The world is shifting. According to the US Census Bureau in 2005, the World's population shifted from predominantly rural to urban and is still growing (US Census, 2005). So what does that mean for rural communities? With the youth continually leaving for larger communities and the decreasing presence of young families, population is declining. Many rural towns have recognized this problem and are trying to initiate actions that will circumvent this dilemma. The leading sources for communication in these towns, newspapers, are disappearing almost as fast as the younger generations. Without these vital sources of communication and information, public engagement from civic leaders is dependent on limited options for communication with their residents. Paradigms of public engagement are created with an urban context in mind and face tactical issues when translated to a rural setting.

Too often, communities and agencies get caught up in the results of a plan or initiative. Contemplation and forethought of the actual process through which one obtains the information is an afterthought. The Rural Development Department of USDA provides "A Guide to Strategic Planning for Rural Communities." The guide is beneficial for establishing a work plan to create a strategic plan. However, when the pamphlet

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reaches the community involvement section, it focuses on what information meeting facilitators need and a few hints on with what organizations the facilitators need to gain favor. This information is helpful but again it does not define the best process on how to obtain that critical information. Is the traditional public meeting the best option or is something new and technology-based going to attract the wide range of ideas and thoughts that rural communities need to empower their citizens to participate in community discussions?

While each community communicates differently, an overall engagement strategy is starting to gain favor. Online engagement is growing in usage and many planners are starting to rely on technology to guide their civic conversations. Online engagement was created with an urban context in mind, where access is readily available and the social awareness of social media and online forums is more prevalent than its rural neighbors. The problems planners or civic leaders now face are how to present these online engagement avenues to populations who are not as connected to technology or technology-based programs. "Whereas an estimated 55 percent of U.S. adults had broadband access at home in 2008, only 41 percent of adults in rural households had broadband access" (Stenberg, Morehart, Vogel, et al., 2009, p.3). The New York Times reports two years later that broadband internet usage in rural communities is still behind its urban counterparts (Severson, 2011). The lack of access to good Internet sources can be an impediment to Internet use.

Another concern that planners should focus on is that, by previous experience, humans already know how to engage in public meetings or other forms of face-to-face engagement. Online engagement is a new frontier and the social unawareness of this specific avenue can decrease its participation rates. Older populations may be the most disadvantaged. There is a stereotype that older populations do not use new technology, however, numerous sources

agree that they are the fastest growing demographic for social media. "Social networking use among Internet users ages 50 and older has nearly doubled—from 22% to 42% over the past year" (Madden, 2010, p.1). This statistic suggests that older populations are starting to become aware of social media and its capabilities. Unfortunately, this data does not separate rural and urban users. Their growth can be related to the fact that younger age groups are "saturated" into social media already and that each year more users are aging into these older age groups (Carstensen, 2013). However, planners are noticing that online usage in rural communities is not increasing in popularity at the same rate. (Interview with Jeff Adams, 2013)

Though older age groups are the fastest growing social media account generators currently, that does not mean they as fluent as younger generations. Elderly websites, such as SeniorCareCorner.com, advocates for seniors to get online and begin to use social media to connect to family, friends, and their community (Seniorcarecorner.com). However, articles on the "social media age divide" point to the older generation not feeling as comfortable or knowledgeable on social media as younger generations who grew up with this technology (Lee, 2011). "Intellectuals over about 45 had already gotten used to a print-centric media diet by the time the Internet arrived" (Lee, 2011). With older age groups, especially the 65+, used to and more comfortable with a "print-centric media diet," enticing them to learn social media in a way similar to how younger generations learned it might not be the best route. If older generations already feel comfortable in a public meeting setting, this "safe place" may be an excellent venue to teach them about social media and encourage them to use online engagement.

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Research Questions

This research project attempted to answer key questions that pertain to online engagement in rural communities. The main question this research hoped to answer is:

Does adding an educational element teaching participants at public meetings in rural communities how to effectively use online engagement, both website and social media, increase participation on these sites?

Other questions of interest include:

Do rural, aging populations have access to computers or Internet?

Do rural, aging populations use social media sites or do they obtain information purely from websites?

Are public engagement strategies the most optimal utilizing a hybrid approach, both face-to-face and online engagement?

The rest of this paper will discuss the different parts of the project. First it will show the initial investigation of public engagement in aging, rural communities, which shaped the research questions. Next a brief discussion of the town of Council Grove and the Flint Hills Regional Council was included to give more background information about who participated in these discussions. The last part of the paper will explore the methodology of the project and then the results from the research. Last, a discussion chapter was included to explain observations perceived during the research.

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This chapter dissects the initial investigation of public engagement in rural communities. The chapter is split into two sections: Literature Review and Professional Interviews. The literature review explores literature relating to public engagement in rural communities, especially those pertaining to online engagement. The professional interview section catalogues the information obtained from interviews with professionals in rural engagement. The preliminary investigation created the basis for the research topic and question.

Literature Review

Public participation in the United States has had a debatable impact on governmental and growth progression. Has the public been involved in how we shape our futures? Or have those in power blinded residents into believing their "participation" was actual involvement in the decision-making process? The review of literature has presented many different opinions, with those in different fields viewing public participation in different ways. However, most literature determined that public participation has been in place to appease legal qualifications but majority of citizens do not have a say in their community decisions.

To review the literature that addresses public engagement, this chapter will focus on why citizens engage in these processes; the different techniques that may be used to engage; a comparison of face-to-face engagement versus online engagement; and more in-depth analysis of rural, aging engagement. The last section will focus on social capitol, community involvement, "how-to's" on rural engagement, and online engagement for the elderly. Figure 2.1 shows a literature tree of the information presented for the Literature Review. The white boxes indicate what area that specific literature explores.

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Title	Author	Social Capital	Public Participation	Rural Engagement	Elderly Engagement	Elderly Social Media	Forms of Engagement
Social Capital and Participation in Community Improvement Activities by Elderly Residents in Small Towns and Rural Communities	Q. Lin, T. Besser		X	X		X	X
Reframing Public Participation: Strategies for the 21st Century	J. Innes, D. Booher	X		X	X	X	X
Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning	P. Davidoff	X		X	X	X	X
A Ladder of Citizen Participation	S. Arnstein	X		X	X	X	X
5 Glimpses into the Future of Civic Engagement	Government.com	X	X	X		X	
Civic Community in Small-Town America	Tolbert, Irwin, Lyson, Nucci		X		X	X	X
Developing Effective Citizen Engagement: A How-To Guide For Community Leaders	Center for Rural Pennslyvania	X	X	X	X		
Obstacles of Social Media Adoption in Older Adults	M. Braun, L. Van Swol	X	X	X	X		
Public Deliberation	C. Lukensmeyer, L. Torres	X	X	X	X	X	
The Entrepreneurial Community Case Study Project Identifying "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival	Wall, Milan	X	X		X	X	X
The Internet and Civic Engagement	Smith, A., Lehman Schlozman, K., Verba, S., & Brady, H.	X		X	X		
There are many types and levels of public engagement. Do you have a process for deciding which approach to use when?	National League of Cities	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capitol	R. Putnam		X	X	X	X	X

Table 2.1 Literature Tree
Source: (Author 2014)

Citizen Participation

In the 1960's, many authors and activists, faced with civic issues, began to chronicle the actual public participation process in the United States. An outcome of this research focused on why people participated and barriers they faced because of officials control over engagement. One of the most noteworthy articles was Sherry Arnstein's (1969) A Ladder of Citizen Participation. The article chronologically places forms of public participation in an 8-rung ladder shown in Figure 2.2 (Arnstein, 1969).

Arnstein (1969) maintains that most forms of participation of the time fell within the bottom rungs of the ladder, allowing citizens to feel like they held some power, but in fact they were being manipulated or given a therapy session. Judith Innes and David Booher (2004) join Arnstein's sentiments and feel that current public participation was just smoke and mirrors to confuse the average resident. These initial barriers in the resident participation process have discouraged people over time from participating. This is further corroborated by the participants' answers in the professional interviews. Residents may want to engage and contribute to the civic discussion, but the lack of actual input they have had in the past discourages them from participating in the present. Innes and Booher (2004) made the distinction that "public participation as involving citizens on the one hand and government on the other" (p. 421). This separation suggests that public engagement discussions are not taken into account when government officials are creating policy. Paul Davidoff (1965) further defined this form of planning as Unitary Planning, "the preparation of plans from one agency with little to no outside input" (p. 332). Even with legal requirements that mandate public engagement as apart of the policy making process, engagement practices, if not properly managed, can still rank on the lower rungs of Arnstein's ladder. Since elitism in policy making by civic leaders is a concern, what are the proposed methods for changing that?

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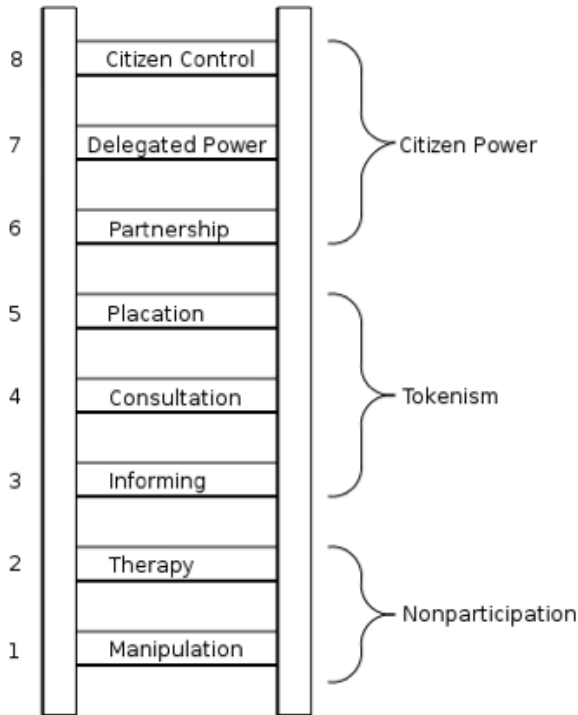
Figure 2.1: A Ladder of Participation.
Source: (Arnstein, 1969)

Innes and Booher present five purposes for public engagement (Innes and Booher, 2004):

- Learn the public's preferences are so these can play a part in their decisions
- Improve decisions by incorporating citizens local knowledge into the calculus
- Advance fairness and justice
- Get legitimacy for public decisions
- Required by law

The first three proposals are ideals for public participation but as Innes and Booher (2004) noted the last two are how most current public participation is classified. Arnstein's (1969) Ladder (Figure 2.2) shows that the next rungs of the ladder fall under the Tokenism section of the ladder. Citizens get some say but still do not have any power. To actually have a say and power, Arnstein (1969) feels t

hat citizens need to have a partnership, delegated power or the most power being citizen control. While complete control is not feasible in American society, due to no direct citizen control over any part of American

government, constitutionally the lower rungs are most feasible in our society. Innes and Booher (2004) argue that the keys to success are dialogue, networks, and institutional capacity. Partnerships and networks can be interlinked as well as delegated power and institutional capacity, being the actual connections between social, intellectual, and political capital that spreads knowledge through interaction (Innes and Booher, 2004, 428).   Last, Davidoff (1965) agrees that Plural Planning is a better option for the planning process. Plural Planning hopes "to give all groups a voice whether they have had traditional 'power' within a community or not" (Davidoff, 1965, p. 334).

Public participation is an integral part of community engagement.

Public Engagement Techniques

There are numerous public engagement techniques available for planners and leaders to use to facilitate community discussions. Since applicable techniques are so broad not all can be discussed or should be discussed when talking of aging, rural communities. Nonetheless, when searching for techniques that were tailored specifically for these communities, not many major studies have focused on the effectiveness of different types of engagement in these particular areas. However, sources continually point to the importance of rural engagement to help grow and facilitate communication in rural places.

The National League of Cities has created a helpful chart to distinguish the various techniques of engagement. These techniques vary on when they should be used, the sequence in which you should use them, and the information that will be gathered from each one (National League of Cities, 2013). Figure 2.3 shows the various categories of engagement.

 For example, if a facilitator wants to gather initial input on a new topic facing a city, company, or entity, they can create a survey, host focus groups, or hold a public hearing to gather the information they are seeking.

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Spectrum of Public Engagement

Type of Engagement	Circulating Information	Discussing and Connecting
What is happening	Local governments, nonprofits, civic organizations, the media, and citizens themselves are making information available about key public issues. Some of this is raw data, provided in ways that make it easy to use and analyze. Some cities also use "citizen's academics" to give people a much closer look at how government works	Citizens, local officials, city staff, and other stakeholders get regular opportunites to build relationships, discuss issues, and celebrate community.
How it is happening	online media coverage public meetings citizen's academies online land use visualization tools serious games	public meetings block parties festivals workshops online forums

Table 2.2 Spectrum of Public Engagement Activities
Source: (National League of Cities, 2013)

Gathering Initial Input	Deliberating and Recommending	Deciding and Acting
Local governments, after other organizations, the media, or citizens themselves reach out to gauge immediate public opinion on a particular issue or question.	Local governments, other organizations, the media, or citizens themselves recruit a wide range of people to address a public issue or decision. The sessions follow good group process guidelines. The participants talk about why the issue matters to them, consider a range of policy options, and make recommendations about what they think should be done.	Local officals and other decision-makers are making policy decisions, developing a plan, or creating a budget based (at least in part) on what they have heard from citizens and other stakeholders, local officials, city staff, other organizations, and citizens themselves are taking action in a variety of ways to address key issues and opportunities.
surveys polls focus groups listening sessions public hearings online crowd sourcing Geographic Info. Systems (GIS) online budget simulators	small face-to-face discussions online deliberations large action forums or town hall meetings deliberations that occur as part of existing meetings	individual volunteer activities action teams and committees changes made by organizations policy decisions strategic plans comp plans budgets

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Holding a workshop would not be the best tool in this situation because the topic is new. Not much depth in the discovery of information has been conducted, and a deep discussion and connections are not needed to gather the initial information which facilitators need. Instead, focus groups should be used for discussing and connecting ideas and topics. Facilitators should always create their work plan for meetings based on the information or purpose for which the meeting is being held.

To further distinguish between the many genres of engagement two different groups were identified. The two underlying sectors of engagement that emerged were face-to-face and online engagement. The pros and cons of both are listed in figure 2.4 (Lukensmeyer et al, 2006).

As the chart indicates both face-to-face engagement and online engagement have advantages and disadvantages. An advantage to face-to-face engagement, trust exercises can be used to help introduce participants to each other, allowing them

a sense of intimacy and trust. Online engagement, on the other hand, shows the information about other participants that they choose to provide or the administrator deems acceptable. No real sense of trust is built online. Face-to-face engagement also has an advantage that a real person facilitates the conversation, keeping the group on track and negating any bad remarks or behavior from the discussion. Online engagement is usually prompted by an initial question with little guidance from the administrator. The level of comprehension that one needs for a public meeting is usually not as high as online engagement, owing to the conversation being conducted verbally. Online engagement requires reading where more extensive comprehension is needed to understand the material. The last real advantage face-to-face has over online engagement is that participants are talking to "live" people. The participants talk at that moment and not over an extended period of time. This allows for their train of thought to be a continuous process rather than a disrupted series of comments or posts.

Feature	Face-to-Face	Online
Identity	In addition to physiological factors, participants are generally asked to introduce themselves as part of trust building.	Users provide as much information as user/designer wishes shared with the group.
Conversation Balance	While similar discussion patterns can and do emerge, the role of the facilitator has greater force in bringing everyone into the discussion.	Conversation is driven by relatively few posters. While there is always a "main stage" for group discussion, numerous sub-conversations arise.
Timing	Participants talk to each other "live," or in real time.	Most online deliberations are asynchronous, which means participants can drop in and out of discussion at will, regardless of time.
Observation	It is difficult, although not impossible, for reserachers and observers to remain unobtrusive.	Guests and researchers can observe the proceedings of online deliberation unnoticed and in very large numbers.
Attention	A high value is placed on active listening by all participants.	Reading comprehension replaces listening skills. Users must possess basic functional literacy to acquire knowledge.
Research	It is extremely difficult and cost-intensive to capture data, substantial interpretation is often required to condense documentation.	Computer mediation renders discussion recordable, quantifiable, and interpretable.
Timeline	While many methods are extended over time, most rely upon a fixed, much shorter time frame for discussion.	Often takes place over several weeks.
Resources	A weakness is the lack of information resources to address concerns as they arise.	Users can access unique information at any time to enhance quality and content of discourse. Information can be verified in real time.
Environment	In general, participants have little influence over the shape of the physical environment. It certainly cannot be customized for individual participants.	Users can often influence the look, fell, and content of the online environments, while joining from a physically comfortable location.
Location	Participants must travel to a central, physical locale. This naturally excludes some citizens.	Ability of users to communicate is not limited to geographic constraints.

Table 2.3 Differences Between Face-to-Face and Online Engagement
Source: (Lukensmeyer & Torres, 2006Engagement

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Figure 2.4 indicates that online engagement has advantages in observation, research, timeline, resources, environment and location. Online engagement allows the users to be in any geographical location they please. It also allows the participant to engage in their bathrobes, on their couch, or where they may be the most comfortable. Rather than being constrained by a venue that is only reserved for a certain length of time that keeps participants attention, online engagement can extend for weeks at a time. This allows for participants to answer questions or contribute ideas with more time for thought. For the administrators observing the dialogue and recording the answers for research, the information is all written down and easy to find, without the fear of escaping thoughts that face-to-face engagement exhibit. Last, online participants, using the Internet, have an almost infinite wealth of knowledge at their fingertips to further conversations or expand them (Lukensmeyer et al, 2006).

Rural Aging Engagement

Rural communities across the nation are aging. Since the founding of the nation, economists have noticed that small towns are bolstered by their local businesses and institutions. Tolbert, Irwin, Lyson, & Nucci (2002) like many of their predecessors feel that small towns can be classified as civic communities. They believe that "civic engagement is enmeshed in locally oriented businesses and a constellation of local associations and organizations" (Tolbert, et al., 2002, p. 92). They also point towards civic organizations (churches and membership based groups) and local third places (places where people go that is not home, work or school) as opportunities for Civic Engagement to be generated. Modern studies suggest that successful rural communities are created with a "participatory approach to community decision-making" and a "cooperative community spirit" (Wall, 1987, p.10)

Rural engagement for the aging can be then broken down into four different categories:

Social Capital, Community Involvement, Rural Engagement, and Online Engagement. Social capital is the underlying reason for engagement, connecting humans and where they live. Community involvement creates the basis of who is involved and why they choose to engage. Rural engagement shows what has worked in the past for facilitators who engage in rural communities. Online usage provides background information on growing online engagement trends and how the elderly use the Internet.

Social Capital

Liu and Besser (2003) point out that the extent of research on elderly focuses on "coping with the frailty and sickness of elderly people" (Liu & Besser, 2003, p. 334). They continue on to explore the aging population in rural communities and their efforts in volunteerism. Through volunteerism, Liu and Besser (2003) believe that the elderly cab benefit the social capital of their community. Liu and Besser (2003) note that many contradictory definitions of social capital exist. For the

purpose this report, Robert Putnam's (2000) definition of social capitol will be used. The definition is as follows, "Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them " (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue." "The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19).

Community Involvement

According to Liu and Besser (2003), a dominant theme in community involvement literature is the identification of the individual characteristics linked with residents in their community. Residents with higher income and education are more likely to be involved

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(Liu & Besser, 2003; Hayghe 1991; Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1986; Oliver 1984; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), and length of residency also is associated with involvement (Liu & Besser 2003; Schiff 1990; Steggert 1975; Verba et al. 1995). Another approach to looking at community involvement is the "curvilinear" process or life cycle explanation. When young, one isn't as involved but as one gets older and richer, involvement increases, especially with the addition of children. But then, as one gets even older, involvement decreases again along with income and health (Liu & Besser., 2003). The opposing side views involvement and age as a cohort effect. The basis of this theory is that people born around the same time share similar life experiences, thus producing a generation of like-minded people. What generations have experienced can increase or decrease their community involvement. Those who started participating while young will continue to participate as they age (Liu & Besser, 2003; Pillemer & Glasgow 2000; Putnam 2000; Ryder 1965).

Rural Engagement

Though not much scholarly work has focused specifically on engagement in rural settings, some institutions have published reports or findings on what they have found while working with rural communities. "How-to" guides or online community toolboxes are published by many local agencies to help community leaders guide their community towards engagement. The information synthesized by these guides seems to suggest similar findings. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania has created a "how-to" for engagement in rural Pennsylvania. They have recognized eight steps of engagement (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2008):

- Define the issues
- Identify the purpose and degree of citizen engagement
- Identify tools for engaging residents
- Identify community groups that need to be involved
- Develop a plan for recruiting and retaining participants

- Create a positive environment for public engagement
- Identify evaluation criteria and decide on next steps
- Maintain open lines of communication

Under the third step, identify tools for engaging residents, the agency listed multiple avenues including: surveys, interviews, public hearings, public issues forums, resident panels, charrettes, etc. However, they do not indicate a success rate for each form of engagement in rural situations.

The University of Kansas has established an online-site for community engagement, known as a community toolbox. The site offers tutorials and information assisting community leaders on engagement. Like the "how-to" guides, the toolbox provides alot of information on how to create a community development program. But, alas, like the Rural Pennsylvania's steps of engagement, it provides many options and no success rates.

Online Usage

Elderly communities have proven that they participate in public meetings or other forms of face-to-face engagement. However, public engagement trends are beginning to online engagement. Government Technology, an online source, notes that future civic engagement trends are all online sources, the leading platforms being Neighborland, Texitizen, Voterheads, Community Planit and Open Town Hall (Government Technology, 2013).

 Are these forms of engagement well suited for the elderly? Many studies have proven that the elderly do not actively participate in online forums or conversations. While the Pew Institute mainly focuses on political engagement trends, their work has established a precedent for the connection between political and civic engagement usage (Smith et al., 2013). Their findings suggest that of the political or civic sharers on blogs or social networking sites , only 10% are 65 years or older (Smith et al., 2013). When compared to

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the 18-29 age range of 37 percent, there is a vast difference (Smith et al., 2013). Numerous reports show that the limitations of the elderly to internet engagement can be linked back to adoption, access, and use (Braun & Van Swol, n.d.). The elderly have, on average, not adopted the internet as a standard part of their day. Many elderly do not currently have access or seek access to computers. Lastly, many elderly have not been trained and thus do not know how to use computers or participate in the online world.

Professional Interviews

Because I did not find much information on online engagement in rural, aging communities, I needed more information to assess that specific side of engagement. To obtain the needed information, I interviewed practicing facilitators in rural areas.   I used their experience to narrow down online engagement issues and develop a research question.

Interview Process

Over a period of three weeks, interviews were conducted to get planners' and practitioners' advice and perspective on engagement today. I conducted the interviews through face-to-face, phone and online forums. Their combined answers are discussed below. While initial questions were created to guide the conversation, many interviews took different courses of conversation.

Interviewees

- Jeff Adams, Regional Planner- Flint Hills Regional Council
- Liz Hendricks, CFO – PublicSquare
- Tim Steffensmeier, Associate Professor – Communication, Kansas State University
- Gary Stith, Assistant Professor – Regional and Community Planning, Kansas State University
- John Keller, Professor – Regional and Community Planning, Kansas State University
- Dan Schultz, Regional Sales Manager, CivicPlus
- Annie Peace, Support Services Director, Meadowlark Hills

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Questions

Have you ever conducted a public engagement campaign in a rural area (population less than 50,000)?

If applicable, what percentages of participants were over the age of 65? Even if it is just an estimate.

What technique of public engagement did you use?

Was it a face-to-face format? Or Online? Or Hybrid of the two?

What was the participation rate compared to the community population?

How did you advertise your engagement? Posters, radio, television, etc.?

Did you ask participants how they heard about the meeting? If so, what was the most prominent response?

How did you prepare the engagement technique? Formulate from existing knowledge, gathered from an existing article or written work, etc.

In your opinion, how successful do you feel the campaign was? Did you gather thoughtful and thorough responses and answers? Did you accomplish the goals you set for the meeting?

Would you recommend your technique for other rural, aging engagement campaigns?

What written works or articles would you recommend for this topic, if any?

Findings

All interviewees had facilitated meetings, conversations, or engagements with either rural, elderly or both populations. With the exception of Dan Schultz, all interviewees had facilitated a face-to-face form of engagement, with an almost even split between the traditional town meetings and the other being tabletop discussions. Other forms of face-to-face engagement:

• Keypad polling
• Road Show Campaign
• Kiosk Meetings
• Questionnaires

Jeff Adams and Dan Schultz have both participated/facilitated online engagement, through a website function.

When asked about the face-to-face engagement, with the exception of Peace and Schultz, all agreed that for rural communities, face-to-face, engagement tends to attract more participants and the results arising from the discussions are more helpful. The forms of face-to-face engagements vary. Five out of the seven interviewees have either facilitated or participated in the traditional public meeting. These meetings are usually conducted by a facilitator giving a presentation, usually of findings. This form of engagement is easy to advertise and assemble. (Most participants think these meetings are just to listen to the findings and not as a communication avenue for discussions.) On Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation, this would fall in the lower rungs of citizen participation. Both Jeff Adams and Annie Peace remarked that these forms of engagement lack a relationship between the facilitators and the participants, a relationship that usually bolsters trust and support. Both agreed that creating smaller groups where conversation is approved tends to provide the facilitators with more thoughtful and responsive answers.

Both Liz Hendricks and Tim Steffensmeier have been participating in an engagement process that they define as a "grassroots"

approach. Liz is the Chief Financial Officer for PublicSquare and Tim, a college professor, is a facilitator for PublicSquare. PublicSquare is a non-profit group that focuses on how communities facilitate and discuss civic issues from citizens and not government officials. They have a unique and growing engagement plan that focuses on the residents and not officials. They begin with establishing stakeholders in a community and holding interviews with those individuals. Those individuals then nominate others who they feel are stakeholders in key issue areas to partake in a steering committee. They take a survey answering only five questions. PublicSquare then takes the information from the survey and any other relevant data they collected and they begin hosting community conversations, or small group conversations. That information is then gathered and presented to the stakeholder committee. Four or five goals are established from the information. Those goals are presented to the community, and after six months the community gets an update from the team about where the process is. This process is always under scrutiny. Jeff Adams has also

participated in this form of engagement and values it because of its connection to the residents. Jeff Adams, Liz Hendricks and Tim Steffensmeier noted how the average resident is actually well informed due to news sources, so where the traditional form is designed to "teach" a resident something is unnecessary. Tim points out that the PublicSquare approach is guided towards listening to the residents and not teaching them. This form of engagement ranks relatively high on the Arnstein's (1969) ladder (Figure 2.2), as it creates a voice for residents in civic issues.

Online engagement has many avenues, including websites, online polling, social media, etc. Engagement through social media includes utilizing sites like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, sites that are used in social manners. John Keller noted that online engagement is the current engagement movement but rural communities, especially aging communities, do not use it. Whether it's a generational stigma or lack of Internet connection, he felt that online engagement should not be the main component of an engagement scheme. Jeff Adams

also expressed similar sentiment. He felt his current online engagement wasn't reaching the size of audience that public meetings get. However, he did note that the addition of online polling or other online functions to public meetings does seem to be accepted well by participants. David Schultz, a governmental website designer, expressed much interest in figuring out how to design online engagement for rural communities. He has yet to work with what he deems rural governments but his company is beginning to break into that barrier. None of the interviewees had much experience with utilizing social media as a form of engagement. They have used social media as another form of advertising but nothing where they ascertain information from social media. Annie Peace agreed with John Keller that the elderly have not reached social media usage on the same level as younger generations but she feels that elderly usage is growing. Due to social acceptance or connection with younger family members, the elderly are beginning to utilize social

media. However, she also agrees that online engagement cannot be the only form of engagement for rural communities.

background information

This chapter discusses the history of Council Grove, population and housing statistics for Council Grove and a brief summary of the Flint Hills Regional Council and its project, a Regional Assessment of Impediments. Council Grove has a rich history and strong community base, but it faces similar issues as other rural communities. One issue that rural communities face is their lack of online engagement usage, which limits the types of public engagement these communities can utilize. Council Grove is well suited to this research because they do participate in civic discussions but do not utilize online engagement to facilitate these discussions. To help address this issue, the local regional council, Flint Hills Regional Council, has begun to use public engagement to gather a consensus of housing needs, which the online educational component will be a part of. From there, the Council will partner with the community to create strategies or plans to address the needs.

Council Grove/Morris County Background

Council Grove and Morris County has a resident base that is dedicated to preserving their
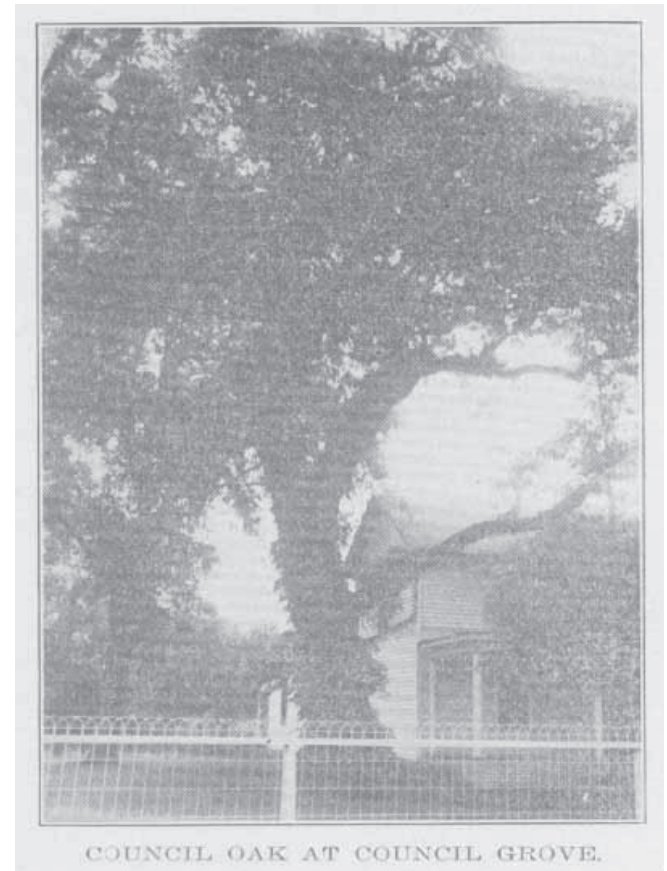

Figure 3.1 Council Oak
Source: (GenKansas.com, 2012)

background information

community and way of life. They proudly promote their history and wish to extend it into their future, but like many rural communities, they face challenges. One challenge they face is housing. In addition to that challenge they will have to calculate their needs they will have to address for future enjoyment of their community. To understand the needs Council Grove faces now, an understanding of the history is necessary.

History of Council Grove and Morris County
In 1825, a council met under a grove of trees to sign a treaty with the Osage Indian tribe that established a highway which would run through their territory (Council Grove Chamber of Commerce, 2011).   The current day meeting space, "Council Oak" (Council Grove Chamber of Commerce, 2011), is where Council Grove is situated. The highway the treaty signed into action was the Santa Fe Trail. Council Grove acted as the only trading post between Independence, MO and Santa Fe, NM. Travelers on the trail would leave their mail at the Post Office Oak, now a national landmark, further establishing that spot as an

important place for future settlement (Council Grove Chamber of Commerce, 2011).

The first European-American, Seth Hays, settled Council Grove in 1847 (Kansas Community Networks, 2013). He came to the area to trade with the Kaw tribe that had a reservation nearby. A post office was built in Council Grove in February, 1855. Three years later, the town was incorporated by the Kansas territory (Kansas Community Networks, 2013).

By 1868 the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas (Katy) Railroad was built through Morris County, bringing new settlers to Council Grove. Not long after that the Kaw Indian Reservation was moved to Oklahoma, opening up more space for white settlement. Morris County continued to be settled and an agriculture economy emerged. (Kansas Community Networks) To promote their historical contribution to Kansas and the settlement of the Western United States, Council Grove hosts annual celebrations, such as Washanga Days and Old Settlers Day, to celebrate these events.
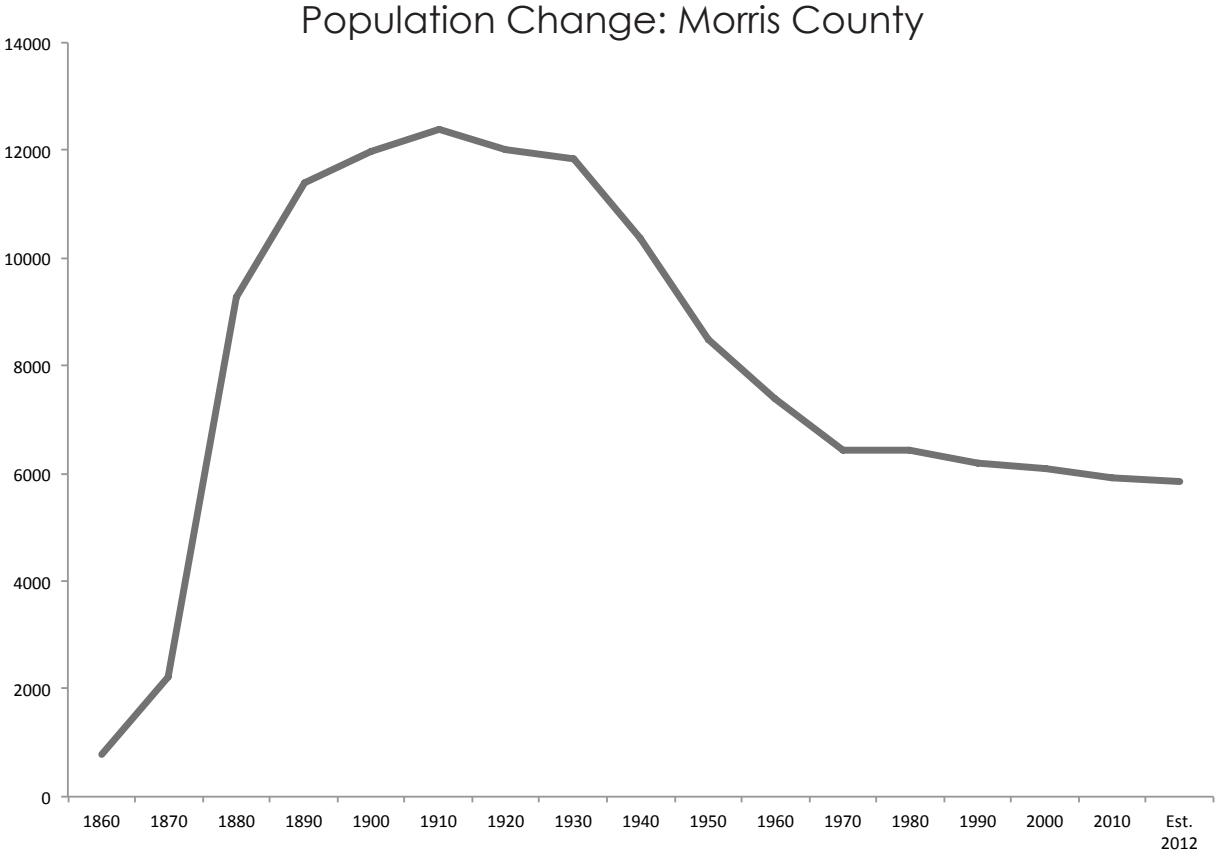
Figure 3.2 Morris County Population Change from Period: 1860-2010
Source: (Data 1860-2010 US Census, and 2012 ACS, Table B01003)

background information

Because of Council Grove's rich history and their established need to preserve that history, residents have had a consistently good attendance for public meetings and discussions on civic issues. This factor has made them an ideal candidate for studying how aging, rural communities will react to the educational presentation and subsequent online engagement usage.

Population Statistics of Council Grove

Today, Council Grove is the county seat and largest town within Morris County.   Morris County has a total landmass of 703 square miles, with just over 2 square miles being in Council Grove. The total population for Morris County is 5,923, while Council Grove's population is 2,182 (2010 US Census). Council Grove's population along with Morris County's had been in a steady decline for many decades until 1990. Figure 3.2 shows the population change from 1860 to 2010 in Morris County.

The median age for Council Grove is 45.9 and Morris County is 47.2. Comparatively, the United States has a median age of 36.8 with a 65 and over age cohort of 12.8 percent (American Community Survey, 2008-2012). Council Grove is almost double the United States with 24.4 percent of its population being older than 65.

Council Grove's age cohort, Figure 3.3, shows that there is a diverse population across the age spectrum. However, the population leans toward the older age cohorts, with over a third being at the retirement age. When compared to the population a decade before, shown in red, the population is aging. Residents 65 and above increased from 23.4 percent of the population to 24.4 percent from 2000 to 2010, with the next oldest age group, 55-64 increasing by 4 percent. The rest of the age groups are decreasing. Since the overall population is declining but yet the older age groups are increasing in population, by definition Council Grove is an aging population.
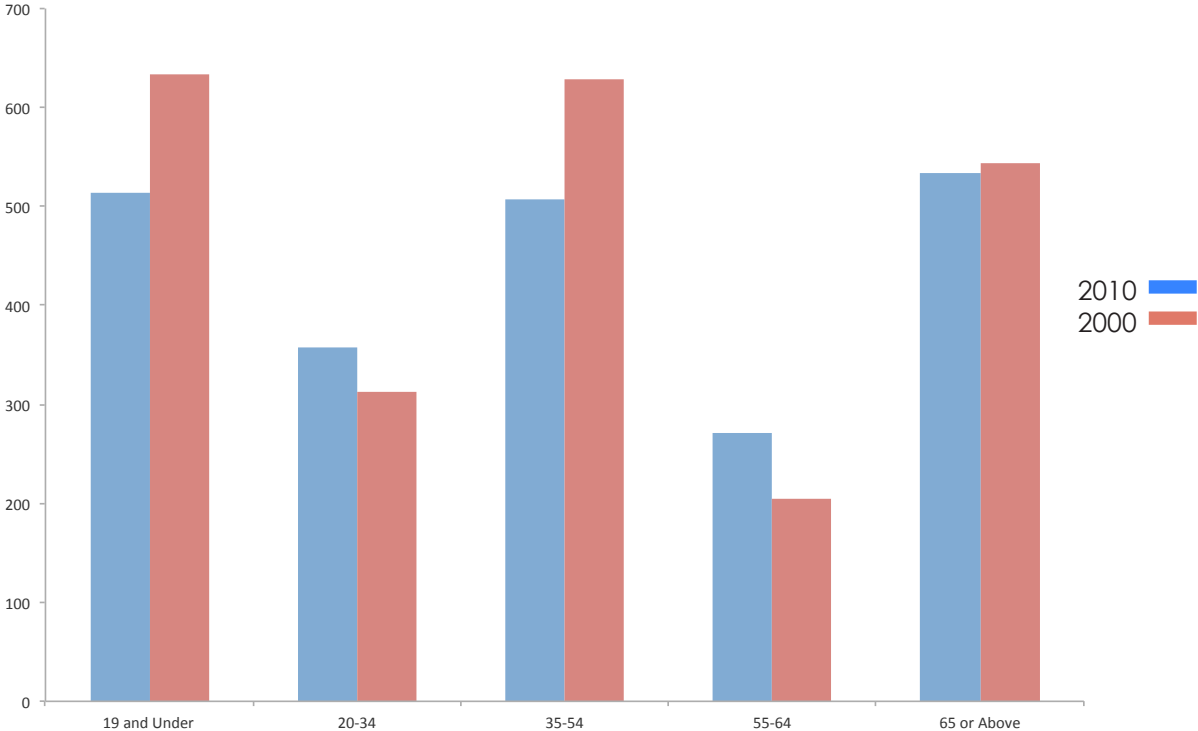
Age of Council Grove

Figure 3.3 Age of Council Grove
Source: (Data 2008-2012 ACS, Table DP05)

background information

Another population indicator is that older populations are remaining in their homes rather than moving into retirement communities. Total household units in Council Grove equates to 991. (American Community Survey, 2008-2012) Of those 991, 360 of them have a person 65 years old or older residing there. This equates to 36 percent of households having a person 65 or older within them, with the average household size being 2.14 (American Community Survey, 2008-2012). Only 47 residents, 65 and over, live within group quarters, or a nursing home (American Community Survey, 2008-2012). If only 8 percent of the elderly live within group quarters, like Table 3.1 suggests, than 92 percent of people 65 and over are choosing to remain in their homes or live with their families or other situation. When compared to the state, the table shows that 5.4 percent of 65 and older citizens live in-group quarters at the state level.

Like many rural communities, Council Grove is an aging community. The population trends show that it is a maturing community with an older population that is higher than the national average. The population trend also indicates that the elderly may be choosing to live by themselves within the community rather than joining a nursing home or retirement community. Is this an indicator of the elderly choosing to remain independent or a lack of elderly housing within Council Grove?

Housing Statistics for Council Grove

Housing in Council Grove is a current concern. The Flint Hills Regional Council, discussed later in the chapter, was approached by residents of Council Grove to help them address and strategize their housing needs. The purpose of the meeting was to begin that process. While the relevance of this information is not directly related to this specific research project, an understanding of the basic housing conditions in Council Grove can help the reader comprehend the type of conversations that this meeting created.

Currently Council Grove and Morris County do not have a housing authority or any form of a

Household Types for Population Over 65 Years of Age
(2008-2012 American Community Survey)

	Council Grove	Kansas
Total:	**558**	**378268**
In households:	91.6%	94.6%
In family households:	44.4%	63.0%
Householder:	23.8%	32.9%
Male	19.7%	24.1%
Female	4.1%	8.8%
Spouse	19.7%	25.4%
Nonrelatives	0.0%	0.2%
In nonfamily households:	47.1%	31.5%
Householder:	43.7%	30.6%
Male:	13.3%	8.6%
Living alone	12.2%	8.1%
Not living alone	1.1%	0.5%
Female:	32.8%	22.0%
Living alone	32.8%	21.6%
Not living alone	0.0%	0.5%
Nonrelatives	1.1%	0.9%
In group quarters	8.4%	0.2%

Table 3.2 Household Types for Population Over 65 Years of Age Source: (Data 2008-2012 ACS, Table B25011)

background information

government housing body. They also do not
have any housing studies or assessments of
their housing stock.

Council Grove has 1107 housing units within
its city limits. Of those housing units, only 991
are occupied, meaning Council Grove has
a housing vacancy rate of 10.5 percent.
Comparatively, Morris County has a vacancy
rate of 20.4 percent.

A majority of the housing units are owner
occupied, while 329 or 33 percent of units
are renter occupied. Only 29 of the renter
occupied units were vacant as of 2010,
making the rental vacancy rate 8.1 percent.
The population housed in rental units is 564 or
9.5 percent of the total population.   Further,
76 percent of the housing units or 662 units
are owner-occupied. Homeowner vacancy
rate is lower, with only 2.7 percent of its units
being vacant. The vast majority, more than
90 percent, resides in owner occupied homes.
See Table 3.2 for more information on Council
Grove housing statistics.

Housing Statistics for Council Grove (2008-2012 American Community Survey)

Housing Occupancy	
Total housing units:	1107
occupied housing units:	991
vacant housing units:	116
for rent:	29
rented, not occupied:	0
for sale, only:	19
sold, not occupied:	17
for season, recreational, or occasional use:	7
all other vacants:	44
Homeowner vacancy rate:	0.027
Rental vacancy rate:	0.081
Housing Tenure	
occupied housing units:	991
owner-occupied housing units:	662
Populaiton in owner-occupied housing units:	1552
average household size of owner-occupied units:	2.34
renter-occupied housing units:	329
population in renter-occupied housing units:	564
average household size of renter-occupied units:	1.71

Table 3.2 Housing Occupancy in Council Grove Source: (Data 2008-2012 ACS, Table DP04)

background information

Flint Hills Regional Council

The Flint Hills Regional Council is a voluntary planning organization that was started through a partnership of five counties, which has expanded since its inception. The Council provides support to participating communities through data collection, leadership, and technical assistance. The Council is also multi-disciplinary, housing the Flint Hills Metropolitan Planning Organization and most recently the Flint Hills Economic Development District, each dealing with issues arising from transportation to economic development. Currently, the Council is undergoing the creation of a 19 county regional plan. The Flint Hills Regional Council was awarded a $1.98 million grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to conduct and create a regional plan for the last large and intact land of tallgrass prairie left in the world. As a part of this grant, a Regional Assessment of Impediments (RAI) is required to deliver to HUD once the grant period is over.

As part of the FHRC's scope of work, engagement is a top priority. Public engagement is how they obtain information about what the people in the region want or need. The FHRC has utilized both face-to-face and online engagement prior to this meeting, encouraging the hybrid form of engagement to residents. Their hopes were to continue conversations from public meetings onto their website and social media pages to spread what was discussed and foster more conversations about those topics. However, the FHRC has found that a disconnect between face-to-face and online engagement exists.

I worked for the FHRC prior to and during the Council Grove meeting. I was a planning intern for the organization, helping create the 19 county regional plan. Through that process, I received firsthand experience with the difficulties the FHRC faced when trying to boost their online engagement. This was the ultimate motivator behind this research

project, and because of my connection with the FHRC I was allowed to conduct my research in cooperation with their project.

Regional Assessment of Impediments

A regional assessment of impediments is a form of a Fair Housing Equity Assessment (FHEA) but from a regional approach. HUD does not currently require grantees to produce RAIs, instead opting for the FHEA, however, there is a growing movement in the Sustainable Communities groups that promotes using the RAI route rather than FHEA (HUD, 2012). While there are not very many differences between the RAI and FHEA, a few distinct differences allow the grantee to analyze housing from a regional perspective. Table 3.3 shows the key differences between the two analyses.

The RAI incorporates all of the criteria of a traditional FHEA but requires a few additional steps. Under the RAI, the grantee must identify other barriers and impediments that the FHEA does not address, especially barriers that hinder housing for the overall region and each jurisdiction (HUD, 2012). Also, the RAI must create a Fair Housing Strategies and Action Plan. This requirement allows the grantee to further strategize for housing impediments by creating a plan to combat the obstructions to fair housing the assessment uncovers (HUD, 2012). This step is not required in the traditional FHEA.

The public meeting this project studied was the initial stakeholder meeting for Council Grove/Morris County and the discussion of how to begin the Flint Hills Regional Assessment of Impediments. The community had already approached the Council with housing concerns and a considerable amount of interest in creating the RAI. The meeting was held Thursday, March 6, 2014 at the Council Grove City Hall. The meeting was open to the public, and advertised to residents of Council Grove and Morris County.

To be able to present some information to the participants, the Council used the 2008 to 2012 American Community Survey data

background information

Element	FHEA	Regional AI
Protected Class Scope	Race/ethnicity	All protected classes
Background Includes consideration of disparities in housing need by protected class	Yes	Yes
Segregation/Integration Includes consideration of how land use and zoning have contributed/been a barrier or impediment	Yes	Yes
RCAP/ECAP or Areas of Minority Concentration Includes consideration of how land use and zoning have contributed/been a barrier or impediment	Yes	Yes
Disparities in Access to Opportunity Includes consideration of how land use and zoning have contributed/been a barrier or impediment affecting Fair Housing Choice	Yes	Yes
Fair Housing Enforcement Infrastructure Includes enforcement actions, summary of FHIP/FHAP	Yes	Yes
Physical Infrastructure Includes consideration of housing- employment-transportation linkage and how provision of municipal services have contributed/been a barrier or impediment	Yes	Recommended
Identification of barriers or impediments to fair housing choice not identified above	Optional	Yes
Fair Housing Strategies & Action Plan	Optional	Required for Certification
Conclusions	Yes	Yes

Table 3.3 FHEA v. RAI
Source: (HUD, 2011)

gathered on housing to show participants some data on issue areas such as housing vacancy, value, age of housing, and the cost of housing in their community. They presented the data in comparison to the other six counties with the scope of the RAI along with the state averages. The presentation information can be found in Appendix A.

methodology

This chapter discusses the different facets of the online engagement research and how they interlink. The research was conducted through observing participants behavior in person and online, while a voluntary survey helped establish information not known through the observations.

Project Questions

This project studies current trends in rural community engagement with an emphasis on rural, aging populations. The project began with an analysis of current engagement trends compared to present planners experiences with engagement in rural communities. It became apparent that online engagement was not performing as well as face-to-face engagement. To encourage more engagement online, a strategy was established that promoted online engagement within a public (face-to-face) meeting. The main question of this research is focused around this strategy:

Question 1:   Does adding an educational component teaching participants at public meetings in rural communities how to effectively use online engagement, both website and social media, increase participation on these sites?

The main question is further analyzed by the monitoring of websites and social media sites, tracking actual participation prior to and after the meeting took place. A survey given at the meeting also helped to analyze further questions the project hoped to answer.

Question 2:   Do rural, aging populations have access to computers or Internet?

Question 3:   Do rural, aging populations use social media sites or do they obtain information purely from websites?

Question 4:   Are public engagement strategies the most optimal utilizing a hybrid approach, both face-to-face and online engagement?

methodology

Parties Involved

The facilitators of the meeting were the FHRC. They are the local regional planning organization, undergoing a Regional Assessment of Impediments (RAI) on housing. The assessment will cover a seven county area with the first community discussion, taking place in Council Grove. The RAI is necessary for the FHRC's grant deliverables and is a part of an overall nineteen county regional plan.

The participants of the meeting were residents of Council Grove and Morris County who expressed interest in understanding the housing conditions within their community. The meeting was open to the public so a variety of stakeholders were present for the meeting.

Description of Desired Sample

Because of the nature of public meetings, anyone may be able to participate in a public meeting and online engagement. The desired sample for this report was participants

over the age of 65 and who resides in a rural community, with additional consideration for the population aged 55-64. The community in which the public meeting took place is rural and has a large percentage of older citizens. Though the desired sample is rural, 65 aged and over participants, younger participants were not excluded from the research.

Methods

Public Engagement Observation/Experiment With the understanding that aging, rural communities participate in face-to-face forms of engagement, the research question is dependent on the online educational component being presented during a public meeting. Because of this community's consistent turnout rates for public meetings, Council Grove was chosen to be presented with the educational component, testing the hybrid approach to engagement. I will test whether the addition of an educational online training module to the standard public meeting will boost online engagement participation.

To test the educational component, a module was presented to the participating residents as part of the meeting. The module was approximately a 10-minute training exercise teaching participants about the effectiveness of online engagement. It showed a step-by-step model of how to login, find the post, and comment or like the question presented by the facilitator or other participants comments. The module also showed participants the benefits of the FHRC's two websites, the major benefit being a collection of data and case studies for participants to utilize. Throughout the entire meeting, facilitators reminded participants that all data and case studies presented to them would be on these websites. After I presented the module, the floor was open to answer any questions about the online resources. No questions were asked.

As a supplement to the training module, a survey was given to the participants about them and their online usage. The survey was designed to understand what the demographics of the participants were; their online capabilities and knowledge prior to the meeting; how they see their involvement in the process; and whether this form of engagement is favorable for rural, aging communities.

The questions of the survey vary in style. Seven of the thirteen questions were factual, while the rest are subjective and based on their experience. Two of the questions were open-ended with the rest being closed-ended questions. A copy of the survey is included in Appendix A.

Online Observation

Observation through tracking participants' online usage was necessary to observe actual online engagement. I observed engagement on all FHRC sites. I also interacted with the online users by posing questions and contributing information to the questions posted. Though this takes place online, my facilitation was still needed.

methodology

I tracked the online engagement through the Flint Hills Regional Council's website by way of Google Analytics and through the Flint Hills Regional Council Facebook account. I presented a question on both the Flint Hills Regional Council Facebook page and Flint Hills Frontiers Facebook page after the meeting. The hope was to further compliment the conversations that occurred during the meeting. The question asked was:

The first RAI kick-off question!
Do you feel there's an adequate mix of housing in your community?

I tracked the online engagement by the number of participants (new and old), likes, and comments. I also acknowledged the quality of the comments, separating the types of comments participants left. This was further compared to the reach of these online questions, studying if people who see them comment or participate or just pass by the conversation. The outcome of the online observation was inconclusive, raising the need for further observation of online tracking.

Relevance

Online engagement tracking is not prevalent in rural communities. Through the literature review, no studies could be found that looked at aging, rural communities or even rural communities and studied whether online engagement had an impact on them. Studying how people use online engagement can help planners or civic employees to better understand that aspect of conversation, and in this case if there is a way to improve participation for online engagement.

Established in prior chapters, online engagement is growing as a form of engagement. Many communities are beginning to place emphasis on their websites specific to engagement purposes. However, rural communities have not shown to follow this growing trend. Either because of technology deficiencies or lack of knowledge on how to utilize online engagement, the problem will arise as to how to educate their constituents on the flexibility of online engagement.

public meeting

Utilizing the public meeting to introduce the online engagement education component ensures that citizens of the community, especially those that are civically involved, are presented with the appropriate information on how to use online engagement. The meeting provided a stage for online engagement awareness. This meeting was designed to insure that the educational component was introduced to the participants, "piggy backing" on the information presented in the meeting that would extend into the online engagement following the meeting. Further information about the participants was obtained through a survey (Appendix C), given at the end of the meeting.

Pre-Meeting Strategy

Information Gathering

An effective strategy for public engagement is to have gathered information and data that allows facilitators to present a valuable and concise presentation to the participants of the meeting. For this specific housing meeting, not much information and data could be collected prior to the meeting. The purpose of this initial meeting was to obtain information on what stakeholders in the community want for their housing study and to obtain any data the community has already gathered on their housing needs and stock. To be able to present some information to the participants, the FHRC used the 2008-2012 American Community Survey data gathered on housing to show participants some data on issue areas such as housing vacancy, value, age of housing, and the cost of housing in their community. The figures used in the meeting presentation are presented in Appendix A.

Steering Committee

Another method to create an effective public meeting is to host a steering committee prior to the meeting. This is accomplished by inviting a few crucial stakeholders that can be "test dummies" to provide valuable insight into what the presentation might be missing or how to present information to the residents. That was the purpose of the stakeholder meeting.

public meeting

There were eight crucial stakeholders invited to attend, of which six actually attended. The FHRC incorporated the responses from the stakeholder meeting into the data gathered, which shaped how the meeting was facilitated. Helpful information obtained from this steering committee included:

- Housing could be older because of historic preservation in Council Grove
- There is no housing authority in Council Grove or Morris County
- The Building Inspector has the most information for housing in this community, including housing assessments
- They would like to have a physical housing needs assessment.
- They want to look at Age Appropriate Housing, with emphasis on elderly housing choices
- They want to understand what rental owner's rights are; what renters' rights are; what rules can owners set for renters

With this initial input, the planning staff was able to formulate a meeting work plan that could address issues that are tailored to that community's needs. The planning staff chose to address more age of housing questions: (a) are people choosing to restore older homes to preserve historical culture in Council Grove; (b) is there need for new housing; (c) are there no developers for housing in the community; (d) what organization in the community should take over the housing concerns; (e) how to address conducting physical housing needs assessment, etc. These issue areas were included into the FHRC questionnaire and ultimately what was presented online after the meeting. Because of the initial steering committee, each community meeting has a clearer direction of what the conversation should include.

Participants

The participants in the Council Grove housing meetings included anyone who lives within Council Grove or Morris County. Flyers and press releases were used to attract people to attend (Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2).

Do you want to learn how to use social media to help discuss your community?

As a part of the Community Housing meeting, hosted by the Flint Hills Regional Council, a friendly tutorial will be given on how to use Facebook and the Flint Hills Forum. If you want to learn more about using social media to assist in community discussions don't miss out on this great opportunity.
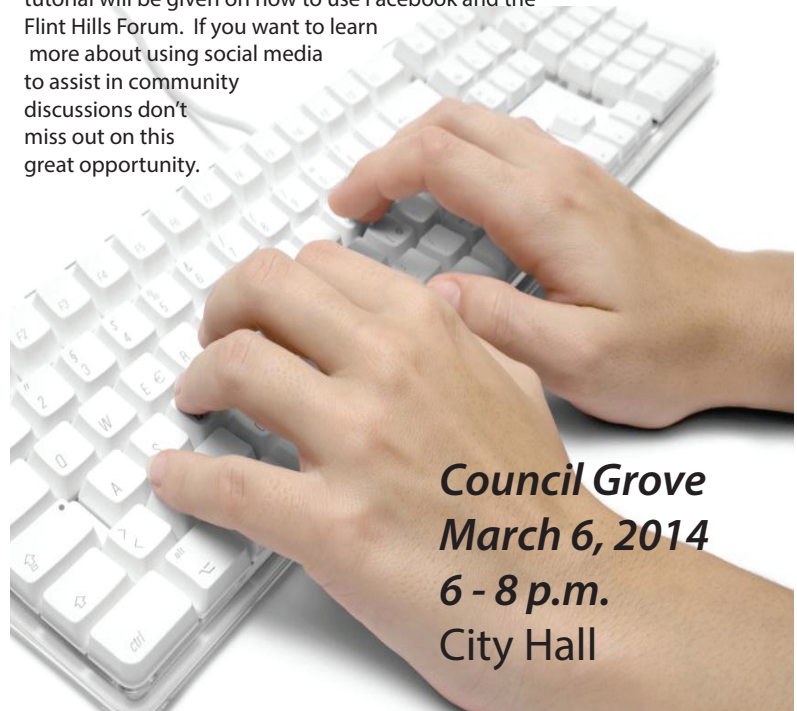
Council Grove
March 6, 2014
6 - 8 p.m.
City Hall

Figure 5.1 Council Grove and Morris County Housing Meeting Poster. Source: (Author 2014)
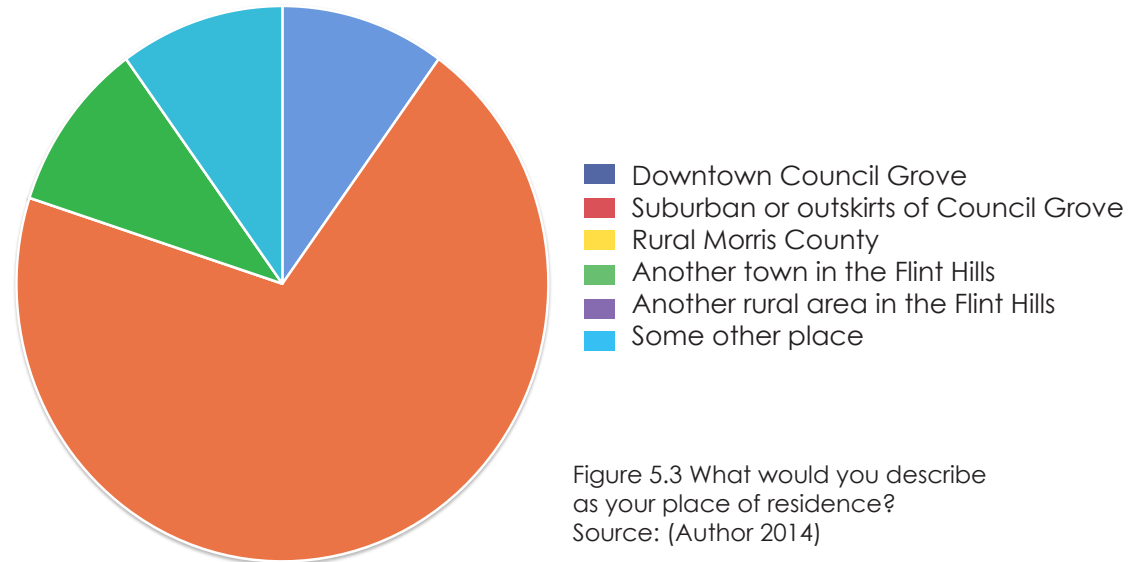
public meeting

Figure 5.2 Flint Hills Regional Council Housing Meeting Poster.
Source: (Flint Hills Regional Council 2014)

What would you describe as your place of residence?

Legend:
- Downtown Council Grove
- Suburban or outskirts of Council Grove
- Rural Morris County
- Another town in the Flint Hills
- Another rural area in the Flint Hills
- Some other place

Figure 5.3 What would you describe as your place of residence?
Source: (Author 2014)

For the purposes of this study, the older population was also recruited to attend the meeting. I created Figure 5.1 to attract older populations who wanted to learn more about how to use social media. They were placed in areas that older populations would frequent. A total of thirteen people attended the meeting, eleven remained till the end and took the public engagement survey. Because of the nature of public meetings, anyone can attend. People who did not live in Council Grove were allowed to attend and participate in the conversation. However, of the participants that showed up, only two indicated that they lived outside the Council Grove city limits. Figure 5.3 shows

public meeting

Age:

Legend:
- 18 or below
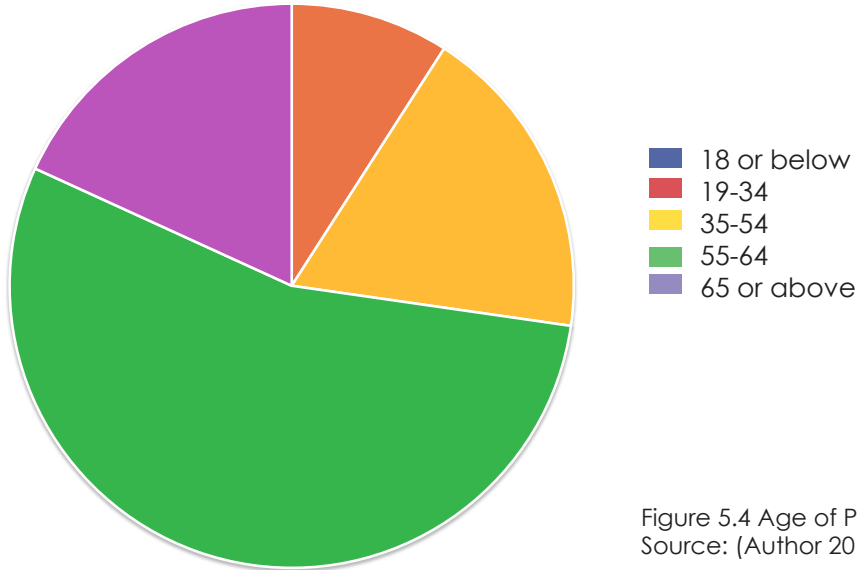- 19-34
- 35-54
- 55-64
- 65 or above

Figure 5.4 Age of Participants
Source: (Author 2014)

where participants designated their place of residence.

Of the attendees, eight designated that they lived within the city limits of Council Grove. Of those who live within Council Grove or its surrounding area, one lives "downtown" or near the main street. Seven live in the

"suburb" or outer skirts of Council Grove. Zero participants claimed they lived in rural Morris County and only one stated they lived in another town in Morris County. One stated they came from "another place", indicating from the Council Grove lake.

Another factor of analysis for the purpose of this research was the age of participants. The main emphasis was participants over the age of 65, with special note of participants over 55. Figure 5.4 shows the attendance by age of participants.

Of the participants, two said they were in the desired 65 and over group. Participants who were in the next group of concern, 55-64, made up six of the participants. Because of the high attendance of this age group, the analysis of this project can proceed forward under the assumption that those participating belong to an aging, rural community. Even though they do not belong in the desired 65+ age group, within the next ten years, the 55 to 64 age group will be within the "elderly" age bracket and understanding how they communicate in public engagement is just as vital. Age group 35-54 had two participants, while there was only one participant in the 19-34 age group, besides myself.

The participation at the public meeting was below expectation. Council Grove had better resident representation at prior FHRC meetings, creating a higher expectation for resident turnout. However, there were multiple community activities occurring the night of the public meeting, along with several ill residents. The Council Grove high school basketball team made it to the state tournament, playing the same date and time as the public meeting. This was unexpected by the FHRC at the time of scheduling the meeting because the FHRC did not know if the basketball team would have the record to make it into post-season play. Because of the basketball game, many residents were out of town and could not attend the meeting, including city officials. Besides the basketball game, two residents could not attend the meeting because they were ill. Both indicated that they would have attended, if they had not been sick. Other community activities and personal commitments can be a hindrance to public engagement, which was the case for this meeting.

Meeting Discussion

The main topics of the meeting included housing occupancy (homeowner and rental

vacancies), age of housing in the community, value of housing in the community (as gathered from the 2008-2012 American Community Survey), housing costs for homeowners with or without a mortgage, and rental costs and percentage of rental costs per income in the community. Based on these initial issues and a quick questionnaire taken at the beginning of the meeting, the discussion broke into two smaller groups, answering questions from the questionnaire. The group was given roughly five minutes to discuss each question, pulling together everyone's answers and collectively thinking of more. The two groups then presented to everyone the synopsis of their discussions. This process answered three questions from the initial questionnaire (FHRC, 2014):

- Which segments of the population experience the greatest difficulty in locating housing in the area? Why?
- Do you feel there's an adequate mix of housing in your community? What housing is needed?

- What is your view or experience with rental housing?

This form of public meeting was successful according to the project survey. Ten of the eleven participants said their favorite and most helpful part of the meeting was the breakout sessions. They liked the "think tank" approach and "sharing ideas, understanding common concerns and issues." Formatting the questions or posts presented online to match the discussions from the public meeting could entice participants to engage online.

Online Education Component

The last portion of the meeting was dedicated to the online educational component. To educate the participants, the initial intent was to go online and go through the processes of how to use the Facebook pages and website. However, because of the venue capabilities, internet access was limited. Knowing that possibility, I created a second presentation. The presentation consisted of a series of

screenshots that showed the step-by-step process of using the online tools. It ranged from logging in, to where to find the FHRC pages, and also how the questions will be presented and how to comment or like them. The same method of utilizing screenshots was used to show the website and its major capabilities as well.

During the presentation, the flexibility of online engagement was heavily promoted. Council Grove is a community that enjoys to be involved in civic issues, judging from prior participation. Online engagement is a way for them to be engaged but not wait for a meeting to be scheduled or to be interviewed personally. Another issue that Council Grove faces, as seen by the attendance in this meeting, is they have difficulty in attracting younger generations. Social media and online engagement is another way to attract younger age groups to these civic discussions. Lastly, the promotion of these websites as key data and information centers was also stressed upon. The FHRC uses their websites to share the information they gather, allowing

participants a one-stop site for information they need when making civic decisions.

Survey

The survey played a vital role for the research. It establishing background knowledge of the participants that otherwise would not be known. The survey asked questions pertaining to their previous experience with public engagement (mainly public meetings), their social media preferences, and their personal opinion of their computer skills among other questions.   The survey analysis spreadsheet can be found in Appendix C.

Observations

While most of the meeting was centered on housing needs of Morris County, a few participants took time to reflect upon their opinions of online engagement and their experiences with Internet usage. Because of these post-meeting conversations, I was able to observe not only the survey responses but

public meeting

also additional testimonial observations from the participants.

Testimonial Observations

One participant noted that the meeting materials had not been present on the FHRC website or the Facebook account. They were hoping to review the information for the meeting prior to attending. They felt that if the meeting material had been present on the website, they would have more in-depth answers for the questions asked. The participant was trying to use the online resources to engage in the process but lack of management on the facilitators' side hindered that.

Another observation was that many participants asked if the information from the meeting presentation was going to be posted on the website or social media accounts. In most situations, facilitators do not have enough time to fully cover statistical findings or case studies without losing their audience's attentions. To combat this issue,

facilitators must synthesize the most important information from their sources, inevitably leaving out information that participants could find beneficial. The importance of websites and social media becomes apparent in these cases as information "hubs."

A third observation was participants expressing their opinion about using social media as public engagement. They felt that the 65+ age group does not participate online and will not. The survey also suggested something similar, saying that the elderly in their community just did not use the Internet in general. They acknowledged that social media is a viable tool to use for engagement but they felt that older generations did not either have access to the internet (if they did, they did not use it often) or that the adoption of using social media by the elderly was not common in that area.

Summary of Survey Responses

The fourth observation notes that the Council Grove participants are very active in public

How many public meetings have you attended prior to this meeting?

Legend:
- ■ 0
- ■ 1-2
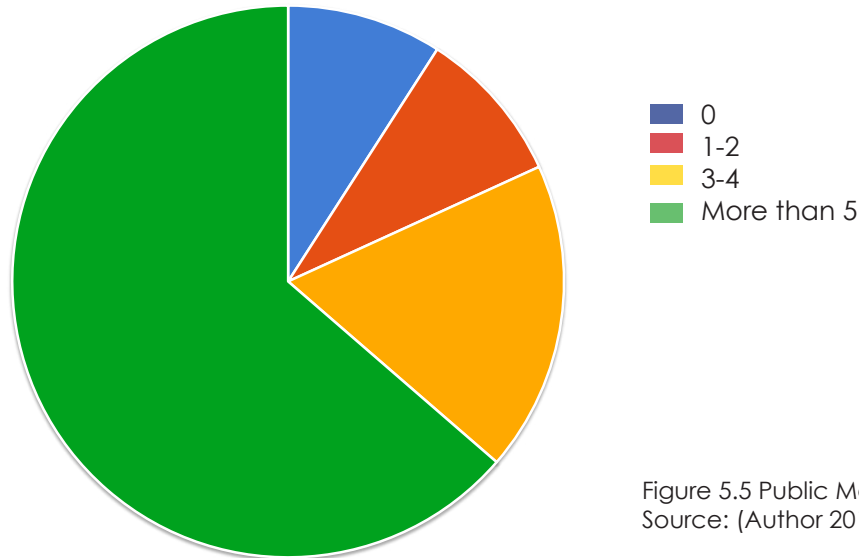- ■ 3-4
- ■ More than 5

Figure 5.5 Public Meeting Attendance
Source: (Author 2014)

engagement. Figure 5.5 shows that seven participants had been to more than five meetings, and two had attended three to four previous meetings. The participants also felt they had a vital role in the plan-making process, eight saying they felt they had a strong ownership of what they discussed (Figure 5.6). Though this was for the meeting,

the FHRC's goal is to extend that same ownership into online engagement by asking similar questions that create conversations rather than guide the participants' answers.

The fifth observation was that the participants were capable of online engagement, having knowledge of the Internet but needing more

public meeting

How much do you feel you contributed to the decisions about housing that Flint Hills Regional Council is going to make in the coming months?
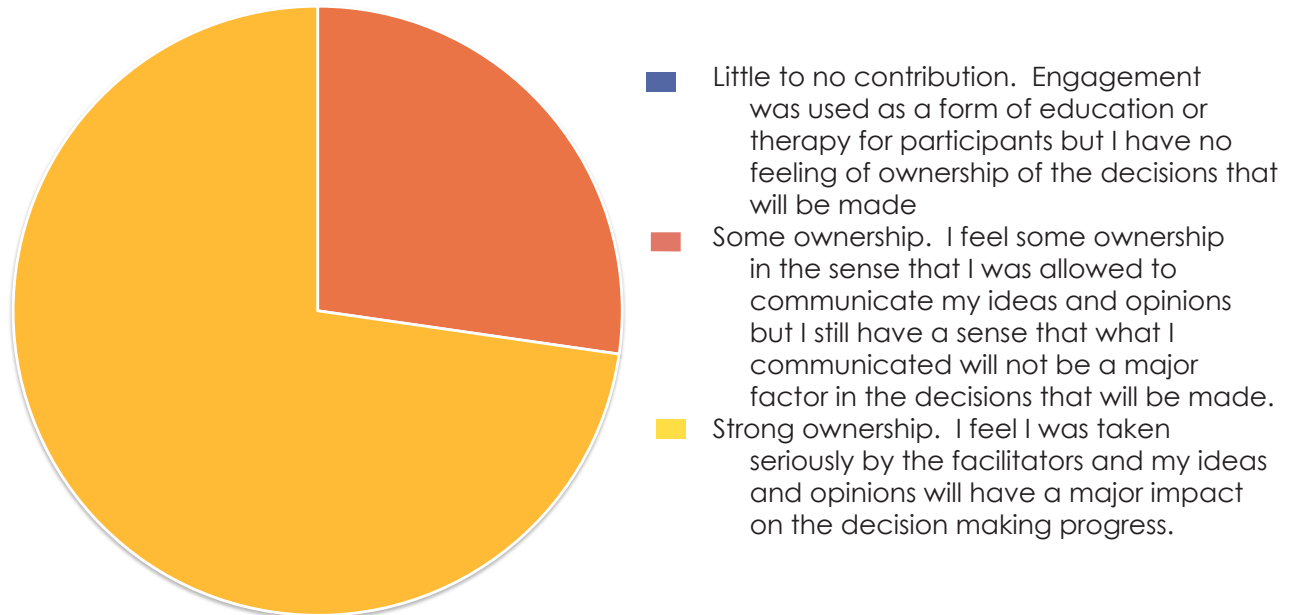

■ Little to no contribution. Engagement was used as a form of education or therapy for participants but I have no feeling of ownership of the decisions that will be made

■ Some ownership. I feel some ownership in the sense that I was allowed to communicate my ideas and opinions but I still have a sense that what I communicated will not be a major factor in the decisions that will be made.

■ Strong ownership. I feel I was taken seriously by the facilitators and my ideas and opinions will have a major impact on the decision making progress.

Figure 5.6 Participant Contribution
Source: (Author 2014)

How often do you get online?

Legend:
- Never
- Once a week
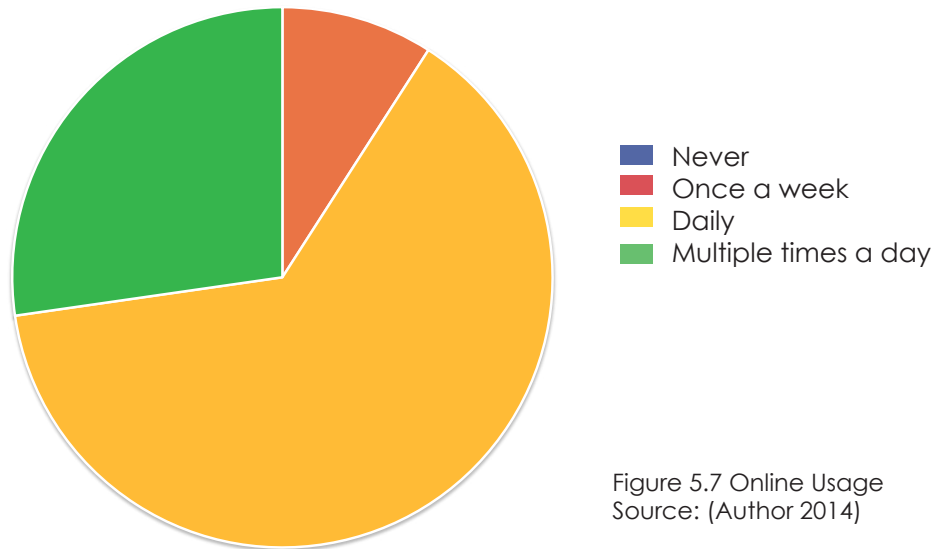- Daily
- Multiple times a day

Figure 5.7 Online Usage
Source: (Author 2014)

education on social media. All participants had Internet access with seven participants getting online daily, and only one participant saying they get on once a week (Figure 5.7).

The FHRC, according to the participants, is properly utilizing Facebook as their main social media engagement site. Eight of the eleven

participants had a Facebook account (Figure 5.8).

Data showed that four participants said they get on their social media accounts daily, with one getting on multiple times a day, another two use it weekly, and one never did (this is explained by the one participant
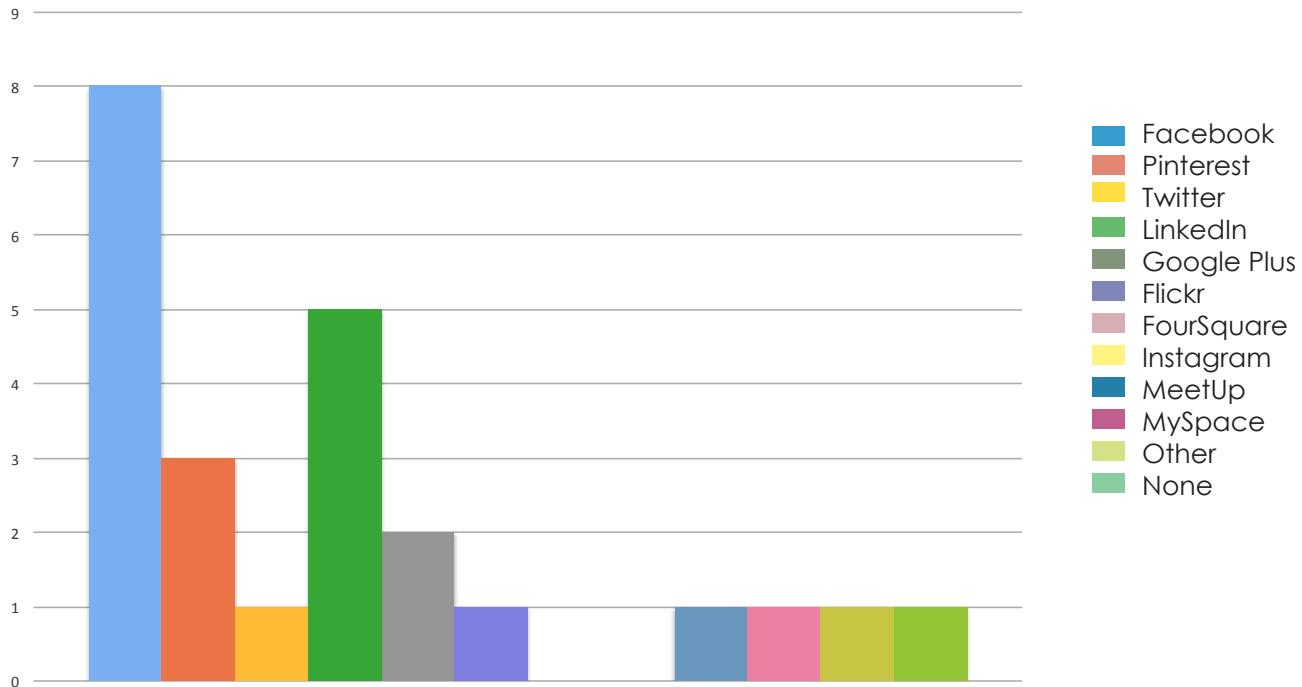
What Social Media do you have an account with?

Figre 5.8 Social Media Account
Source: (Author 2014)

who indicated that they did not have a social media account on any site). The final two said they get online as "other." They did not indicate what "other" meant. The participants were almost evenly split on their skills of using social media. Almost half indicated themselves as novices, while the other side said intermediate, and one person claiming proficient. This helps acknowledge the need for an educational component in public meetings on social media.

One last observation, a personal observation, was that no one seemed opposed to the educational component. They seemed to acknowledge the relevance of the information for the presentation. One participant nodded their head when the presented goal of online engagement was to further discuss the topics and issues examined in the public meeting.

online engagement

Online Engagement in rural communities has not had the positive reception like bigger cities. Even though broadband internet service is still lagging behind in rural America, most Americans do have access to internet, and many of those have social media accounts. Like previously stated, older adults are the fastest growing age group in social media account generation currently. This study analyzed online engagement before and after a public meeting. The participants lived in Council Grove and Morris County, and were interested in housing in their community. By participating in the FHRC's meeting on housing, they were presented with an educational demonstration on how to utilize the FHRC's forms of online engagement. This chapter will analyze the online engagement activities of the FHRC's website and Facebook pages prior to and after the meeting.

Pre-Meeting Online Engagement

The online engagement tools the FHRC employs is their website, Flint Hills Frontiers (FHF), and their two Facebook pages, Flint Hills Regional Council page and Flint Hills Frontiers page.

Flint Hills Frontiers Forum

The FHF includes a Forum space that allows people to communicate and share thoughts and ideas about key issues for the nineteen county regional plan the FHRC is in the process of creating. The Forum does not address, however, the issues of the RAI, the reason for hosting the public meeting. While the Forum cannot track the online conversations that led up to and continued after this specific meeting because of its discontinuation, it can establish a basis for how participants have utilized the FHRC's online sources in the past and set a precedent to compare against. It's discontinuation was because of its lack of usage by residents of the Flint Hills. However, for those who did participate, their contributions were informative. The Forum had seven categories, with each category discussing an individual topic area: natural, cultural, social, mobility, farming and ranching, opportunity & economic

development and built environment. Online users could either like, comment, or add an idea to each specific category. The forum also tracked how many people viewed a specific category. The categories had 927 views, the average being 137.4 views per category (min. 32, max. 476).

With a total of 927 views, there were only 28 total comments. With an average of 4 comments per topic, approximately 133 people viewed the conversation without adding their own input, or 96.8%. (Min. 0, Max. 11) Similarly, the average likes per category was 3.4. (Total 24, Min. 0, Max. 12) The Forum did receive better input from those who had ideas for the specific topics. Online users contributed a total of 68 ideas, with the average being 9.7 per topic. (Ideas & Comments were also added by Administrators of the Forum but were usually taken from ideas expressed in meetings or other conversations, or showed case studies for the specific idea.) While the conversational interactions on the forum seemed limited, there were a few cases where people began to dissect an

issue and formulate ideas on how to fix the problem. One instance was a discussion over affordable housing. One person questioned what the definition of affordable housing was, and specifically for this region. Other online users expanded on this issue, raising possible scenarios to solve the problem. For the purpose of the Forum this was an ideal outcome for one idea.

Flint Hills Frontiers Website

The FHF can be tracked through many different criteria settings but for the purposes of this study, the visits compared to new visitors data and the location of visits was analyzed. Prior to the meeting, the data was tracked from February 1st to March 5th of 2014. Over that month there were 197 total visits on the Frontiers website, 118 of those were new visitors. Figure 6.1 shows the data in a graphical form.

This data shows, in light grey, the total visits for each day in the month leading up to the meeting. The dark grey shows how many of

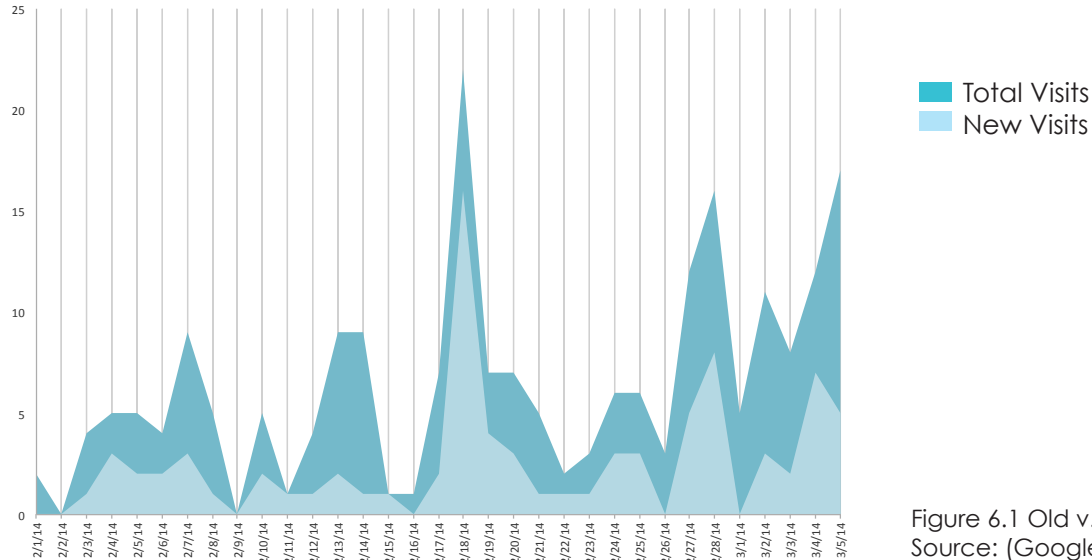## Visits v. New Visits: Prior to Meeting

Figure 6.1 Old v. New Visits
Source: (Google Analytics, 2014)

those visits were by newcomers. During this time period, one public meeting was held on February 19th. The Council of Leaders meeting, shown in the rectangle, saw a considerable spike in visits, new and old. One interesting trend the data shows is that more visitors during the Council of Leaders meeting were old visitors. This could be explained due to the nature of the meeting and the attendees that were invited. The meeting was a stakeholder meeting that showed elected officials and leaders of the communities in the Flint Hills Region the next phase of data for the regional plan being created. Because most of the attendees had already been involved in the planning process, it can be assumed that they had already visited the website prior to the meeting. Another prominent date, prior

online engagement

to the meeting, was the stakeholder meeting for the Morris County/Council Grove housing meeting, held on February 25. (This date is marked by the smaller box.) The meeting presented the information to a few critical members of that community. At this time emails and posters were sent out to residents and businesses in the community to advertise for the meeting. Also, a press release was advertised in the Council Grove Republican. According to the same chart, the number of new visitors increased leading up to the meeting.

Table 6.1 shows the top ten geographical location by visits. The table indicates that Council Grove was the third highest community to access the FHF website. The second geographical location, not set, are visitors located from outside city limits. Some of those visitors could have been from Morris County. Excluding the not set online visitors, 7 out of the 90 visitors were from Council Grove. This does not indicate a strong online usage by those in Council Grove as a number but for the region as a whole has a population of 348833, 2182 living in council Grove (2010 US Census).

Facebook

The Flint Hills Regional Council has two Facebook pages, Flint Hills Frontiers page and Flint Hills Regional Council page. The Flint Hills Frontiers page has 237 followers while the Flint Hills Regional Council page has 98. Over the past month and a half both pages have had consistent likes, both having 2 new followers since the meeting. Over the same period, both pages had the same posts submitted on both of them.

Flint Hills Regional Council Page

Insights, for Facebook, allows the administrator of pages to look at the analytics of visits, engagement, and certain aspects of followers. Luckily for the purposes of the report, Insights divides its viewership by age. Figure 6.2 shows the combined Facebook pages percentages of followers by their age, the biggest groups followers being Men age

Top Ten Geographical Locations by Visits

City	Visits	% New Visits	New Visits	Bounce Rate	Pages / Visit	Avg. Visit Duration	Goal Conversion Rate
Manhattan	16	18.75%	3	56.25%	2.06	0:01:20	0%
(not set)	8	100%	8	100%	1	0:00:00	0%
Council Grove	7	28.57%	2	57.14%	1.71	0:00:11	0%
Sao Paulo	6	100%	6	100%	1	0:00:00	0%
Fort Riley	6	0%	0	66.67%	2.5	0:04:35	0%
Kansas City	4	0%	0	0%	3.25	0:00:37	0%
Washington	2	50%	1	0%	3	0:00:17	0%
Topeka	2	50%	1	50%	2.5	0:05:19	0%
Wichita	2	100%	2	50%	1.5	0:00:43	0%
Claremore	2	0%	0	50%	2.5	0:00:38	0%
Total	**90**	**63.33%**	**57**	**72.22%**	**1.69**	**0:01:01**	**0%**

Table 6.1 Website Visits By Place
Source: (Google Analytics, 2014)

online engagement

35-44 and Women 45-54. The 65+ age group equates to 7% of followers, 5% of men and 2% of women. The FHRC Facebook pages had a higher 65+ representation than the average Facebook page.

Insights can also track when the best time to post to reach the Facebook audience is. The peak time for the Flint Hills Regional Council page is 8 p.m. This helps the administrator choose when to post statuses, during the time frame after the meeting the statuses were posted around 6 p.m.

Prior to the meeting, Insights tracked the total reach, number of likes, and number of visits. Total reach is how many Facebook accounts had seen the post, whether it was on their newsfeed or they went to the Flint Hills Regional Council page. Visits indicate the number of people who visits the Flint Hills Regional Council page and likes indicate how many people liked a post.   Figure 6.3 shows the total reach, likes, and visits for the time period February 1, 2014 to March 5, 2014. The peak reach date was February 25, 2014. On that date one status was posted:

Thank you to all of those who participated in the Council of Leaders meeting last Wednesday! Over 60 of your community elected officials and leaders attended and contributed to the discussion. The Council of Leaders meeting was the kick-off event for the next phase of public meeting of the Flint Hills Frontiers project. The Spring Toolbox meetings will be beginning March 25th in Marysville. Stay tuned for updates!!

24 people saw that post, but nobody commented or liked it. After the February 25, a series of statuses were posted about the upcoming meeting and review of what happened at the Council of Leaders meeting. Again nobody commented or liked these posts but viewership remained around the lower twenties and upper teens. Even though the top reach was during February 25, there was no activity on that date according to Figure 6.3. However, some FHRC posts were shared by a few followers. Followers consistently only viewed statuses from the timeline, not focusing on any other tabs on the page.

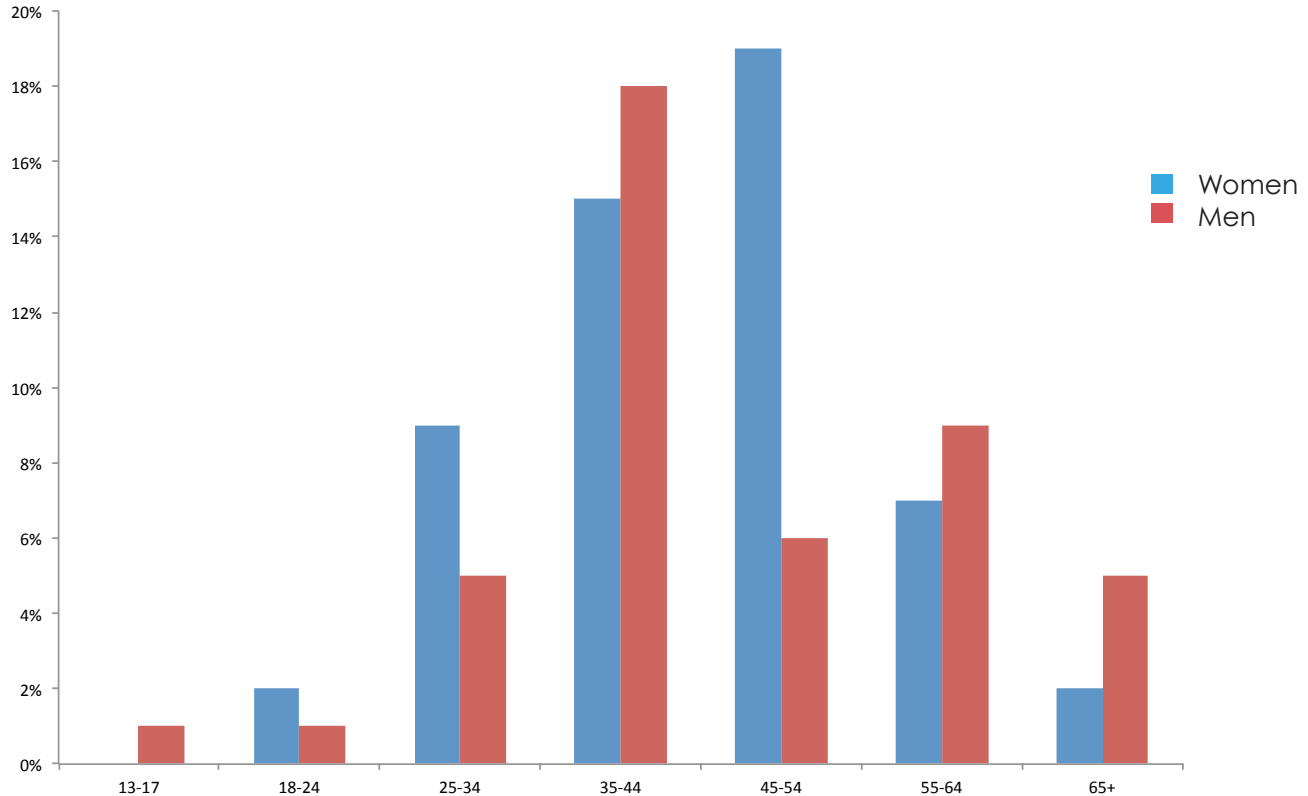## Age of Flint Hills Regional Council Facebook Subscribers

Figure 6.2 Age of Facebook Followers
Source: (Facebook Insights, 2014)

online engagement
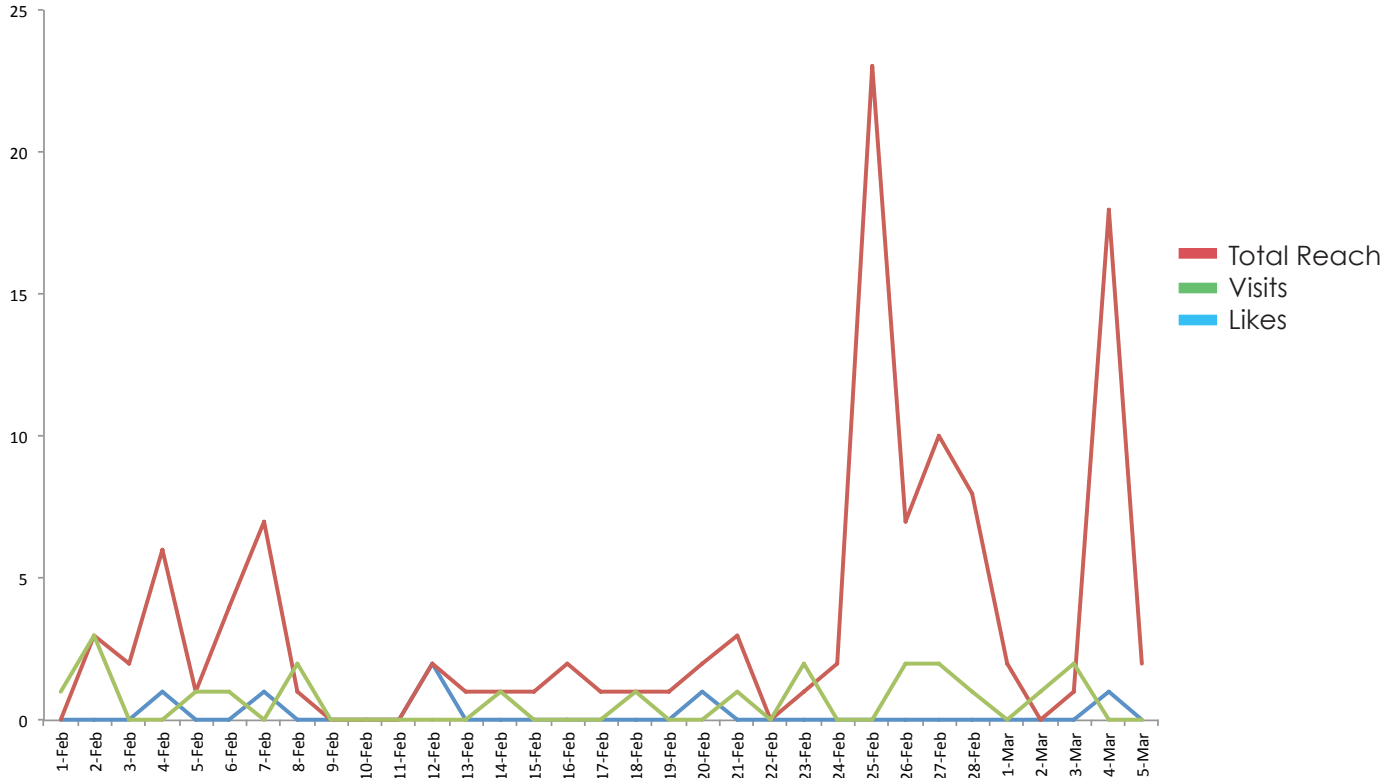
Flint Hills Regional Council Page Pre-Meeting Tacking

Figure 6.3 Facebook Regional Council Page Data
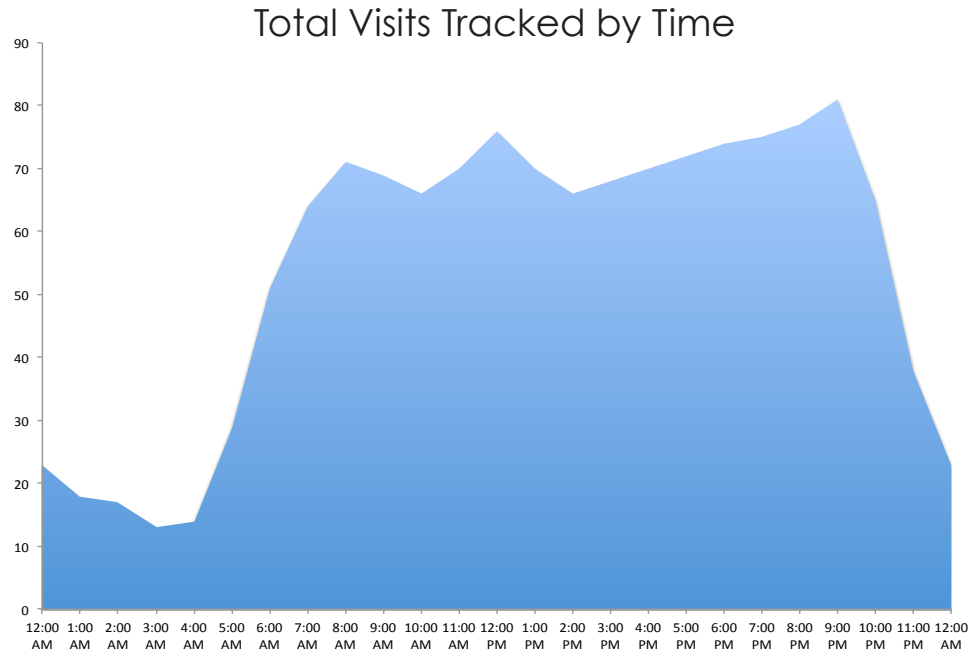Source: (Facebook Insights, 2014)

Total Visits Tracked by Time

Figure 6.4 Best Reach Time Period
Source: (Facebook Insights, 2014)

Flint Hills Frontiers Page

Insights, again, tracked when the best time to post to reach the Facebook audience is, shown in Figure 6.4. The peak time for the Flint Hills Frontiers page is 8 p.m. This helps the administrator choose when to post statuses, during the time frame after the meeting the

statuses were posted around 6 p.m. This is further discussed in the next chapter.

The Frontiers page shared the same status updates as the Regional Council page but there are dissimilarities in the overall reach,

online engagement

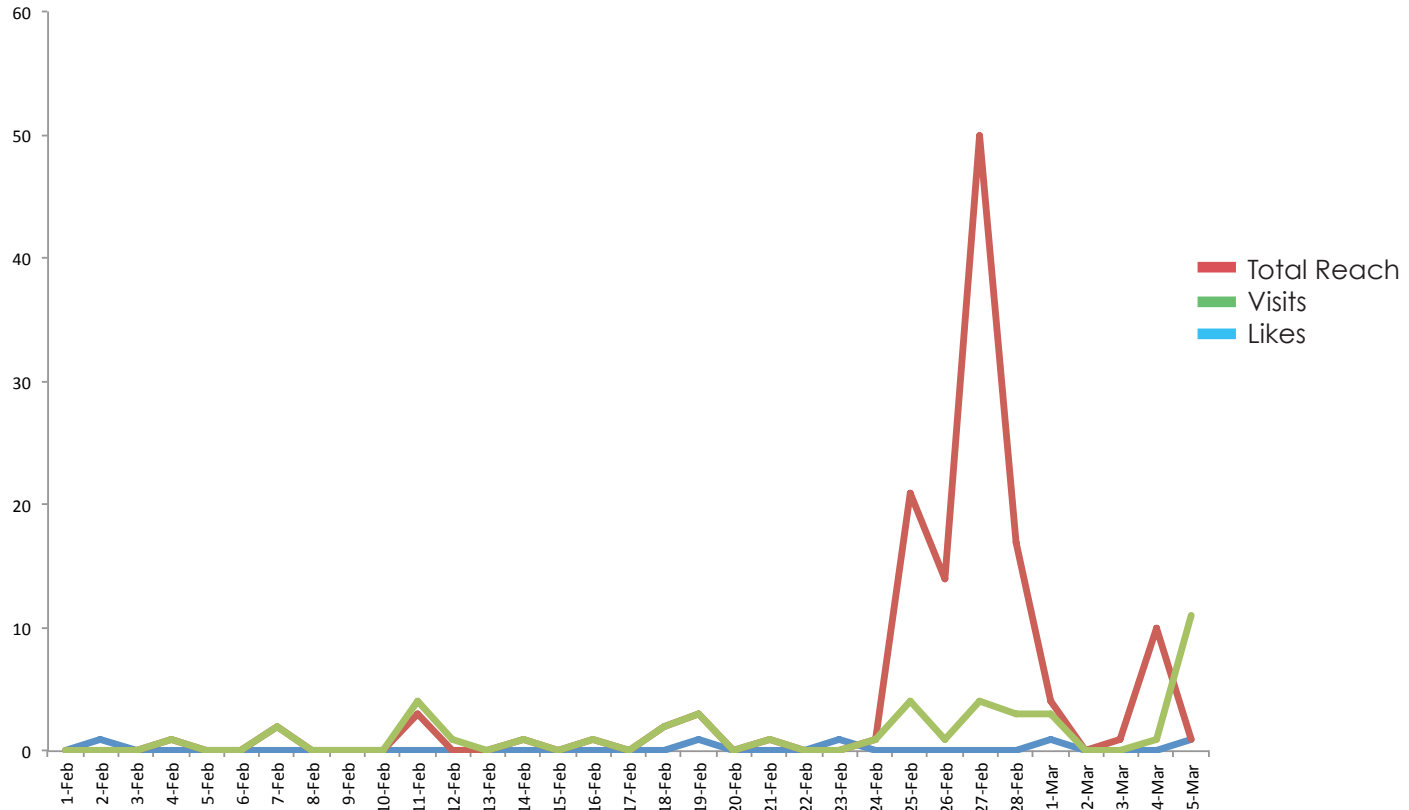## Flint Hills Frontiers Page Pre-Meeting Tacking

Figure 6.5 Frontier Likes, Total Reach, & Visits
Source: (Facebook Insights, 2014)

total number of people who say the post. While the Regional Council page did not see a strong reach till the end of the month of February, the Frontiers page did having a higher reach on February 19th. On this day the FHRC held a meeting, the Council of Leaders Stakeholder meeting. There were no new status updates that day, indicating the traffic for the page increased due to the meeting. The rest of the reach is similar to the Regional Council page, for the same reasons. Figure 6.5 shows that the status update on February 27, a blast about the upcoming housing meeting created likes, comments and shares.

After the Meeting

Flint Hills Frontiers Website

The Frontiers Website was promoted as the informational gathering site for case studies and other information pertaining to the RAI. If meeting participants were to look on the Frontiers website they would find

the data presented at the meeting, case studies from other housing studies, and the housing questionnaire participants took at the beginning of the meeting. Figure 6.6 shows the total visits compared to new visitors.

Since the meeting, most visits occurred on the day of the meeting. Though it seems that the meeting would be a driver for some of the site visits no one from Council Grove visited the site that day, but 2 from the not set category did. Since that day, Council Grove users have visited the Frontiers site. Table 6.2 shows that 7 visits have come from Council Grove, the same amount as the week leading up to the meeting.

Viewers from Council Grove have not decreased from before the meeting but they have not increased either. (Keep in mind that only 13 people participated in the public meeting.) Since the meeting, new visitors to site have decreased overall as well. However, there were two new visitors from Council Grove.

online engagement
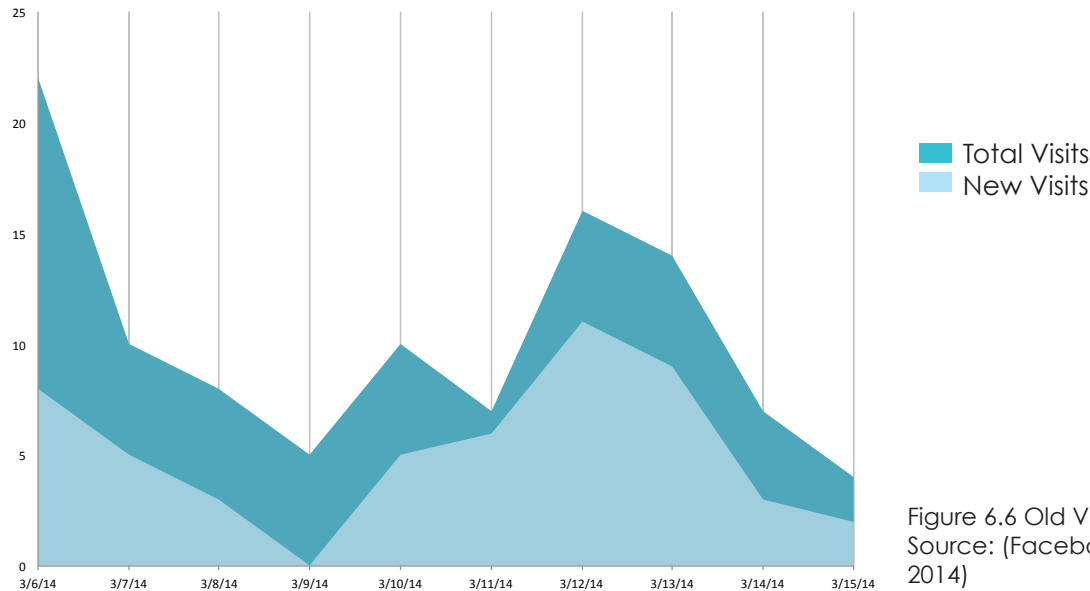
Visits v. New Visits: After Meeting

Figure 6.6 Old Visitors v. New
Source: (Facebook Insights, 2014)

Its interesting to compare the site visit number from Council Grove to those who took the survey and said they would participate in the future online engagement. Figure 6.7 shows the responses to question 11. Would you participate in an online forum such as the Flint Hills Frontiers Forum or Facebook site in the future?

Seven online users from Council Grove have visited the Frontiers website, while eight of the eleven survey participants said they would participate online in the future. There is no way of knowing if these are one in the same but the data is congruent with the survey answers.

Top Ten Geographical Locations by Visits

City	Visits	% New Visits	New Visits	Bounce Rate	Pages / Visit	Avg. Visit Duration	Goal Conversion Rate
Manhattan	20	20%	4	60%	2.5	0:01:25	0%
Topeka	8	50%	4	37.50%	2.25	0:01:51	0%
Council Grove	7	28.57%	2	71.43%	3.71	0:01:31	0%
Fort Riley	7	28.57%	2	100%	1	0:00:00	0%
Junction City	7	28.57%	2	100%	1	0:00:00	0%
(not set)	6	83.33%	5	100%	1	0:00:00	0%
Emporia	5	80%	4	100%	1	0:00:00	0%
Sao Paulo	3	100%	3	100%	1	0:00:00	0%
Taylorville	3	0%	0	66.67%	1.33	0:00:40	0%
Champaign	2	50%	1	0%	3.5	0:07:11	0%
Total	**98**	**50%**	**49**	**75.51%**	**1.73**	**0:00:52**	**0%**

Table 6.2 Website Visits By Location (Post-Meeting)
Source: (Google Analytics, 2014)

online engagement

Facebook

Flint Hills Regional Council Page

From the time period of March 6, 2014 to March 15, 2014, Insights tracked the same criteria from before the meeting. On March 7th, the administrator posted:

The first RAI kick-off question!
Do you feel there's an adequate mix of housing in your community?

Figure 6.8 indicates that on that day, the page had its highest viewership (total reach). The post reached twenty six people, the highest of any post on the page. However, like previous posts Figure 6.8 indicates that nobody liked, commented on or shared the status update. To help create more emphasis on that specific status, the administrator commented on the status:

Ten out of the thirteen people who took the survey at the Morris County Housing Meeting felt that there wasn't an adequate mixture of housing in their county.

Unfortunately it did not have the desired effect. No new comments or likes followed. One person did share another status during that time frame pertaining to another series of upcoming meetings. Figure 6.8 shows the page visits. Besides the addition of the administrators viewing insights, the peak page

visits are consistent with the total reach, the peaks happening on March 7th and March 9, followed by a consistent plateau.

Would you participate in an online forum such as the Flint Hills Frontiers Forum or Facebook site in the future?
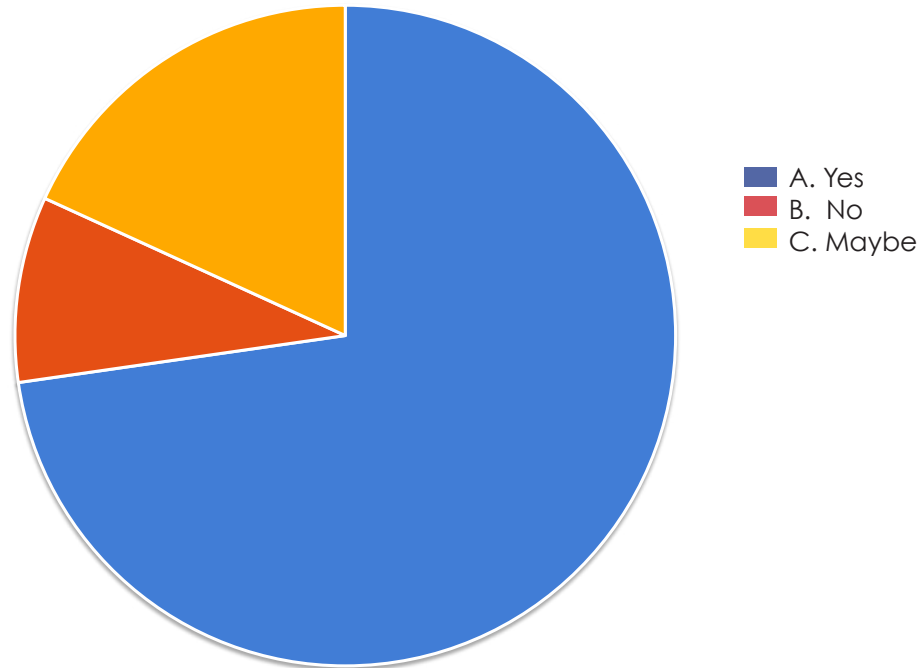

Legend:
- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Maybe

Figure 6.7 Future Online Participation
Source: (Author 2014)

online engagement

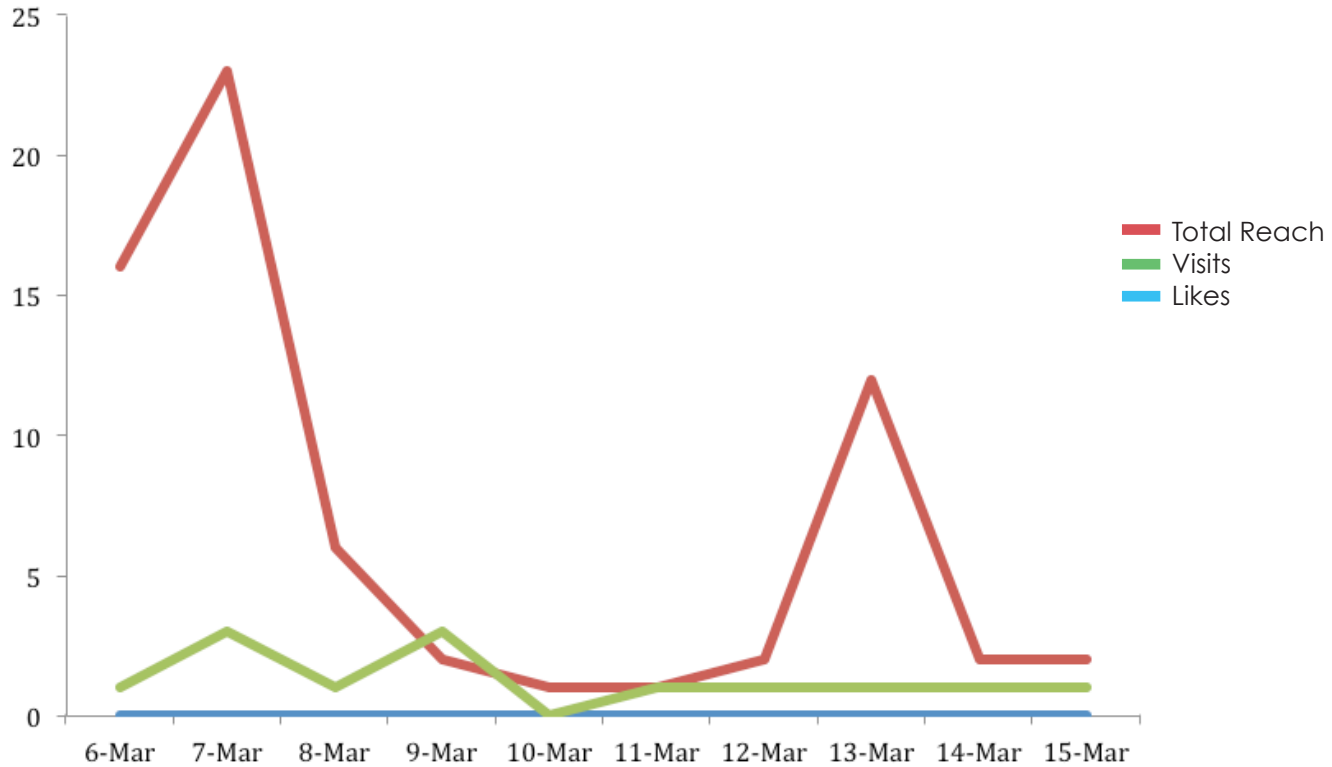## Flint Hills Regional Council Page Post-Meeting Tacking

Figure 6.8 FHRC Page Post Meeting
Source: (Facebook Insights, 2014)

Flint Hills Frontiers Page

From the time period of March 6, 2014 to March 15, 2014, Insights tracked the same criteria from before the meeting. On March 7th, the administrator posted:

The first RAI kick-off question!
Do you feel there's an adequate mix of housing in your community?

Figure 6.9 shows that the highest total reach was during the timeframe the administrator posted the housing meeting question. 68 people saw the status but again no one commented, liked or shared the post. Figure 6.9 also shows the likes during that time period, comments and shares were not non-existent. The likes during this time were for other posts during that timeframe, mainly for the upcoming separate series of meetings.

Last, Figure 6.9 shows the page visits during the same timeframe. Again, followers on the Frontiers page had a more diverse viewership to tab ratio, but no significant spike during the meeting update posts.

online engagement

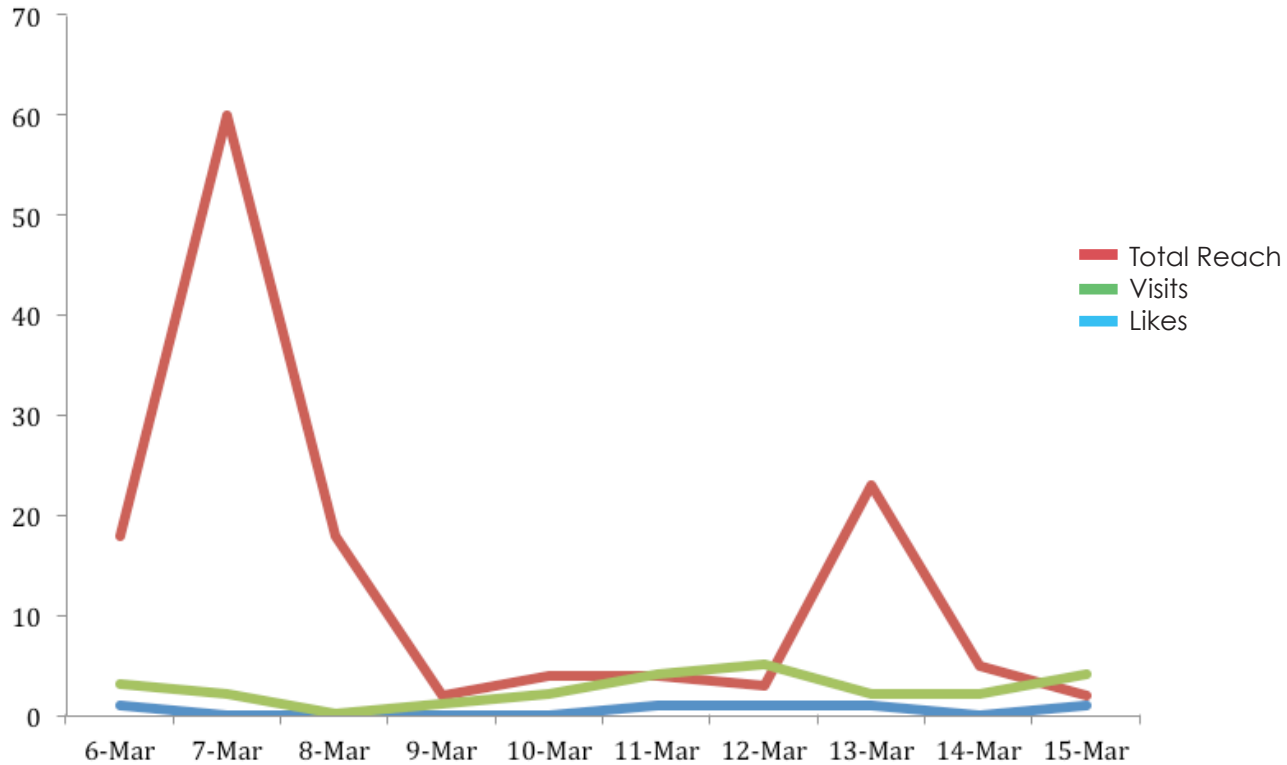Flint Hills Frontiers Page Post-Meeting Tacking

Figure 6.9 Frontiers Post Meeting
Source: (Facebook Insights, 2014)

Observations

The hopes of this research was to increase online engagement by educating participants at public meetings with the how to use social media for engagement purposes. There was not a significant change in social media or website usage to suggest the educational component worked. However, tracking the online engagement did provide more insight into how people use the social media and websites of the FHRC.

The Flint Hills Frontiers Website does not provide users with the ability to engage but does provide a facility to access information the FHRC gathers. Online tracking of the website suggests that visits increase leading up to meetings and right after them. By making sure to promote the website during the meetings, which the FHRC already does, participants will use the website to educate themselves on the project and other information gathered by the FHRC.

Social media is not being utilized to its fullest potential. Whether this is because residents of the Flint Hills are unaware or not trained to use the FHRC's social media for engagement purposes, there is a disconnect. Maybe with future continuous use of the educational component, residents will utilize the Facebook pages to continue civic discussions. However, future research and observation will be required to see if the educational component will achieve its goal in the future.

discussion

While the research has brought up many different topics to discuss and consider, three specific conclusions have distinguished themselves from the rest.

1. Public engagement is not mandatory; it competes with other personal activities.
2. Based of the survey and some statistics from online analytics, 65 and over participants may never be suited for online engagement, but the 55 to 64 age group may be adaptable to online engagement.
3. Last, people enjoy public meetings where smaller tabletop discussions are utilized, providing insight into how online engagement should be programmed to replicate these more intimate conversations.

This chapter will discuss these key findings in depth.

Competitive Outside Forces

The first discussion point that hinders both the public meeting and specifically for this online engagement is relevant to all forms of public engagement. Public engagement competes with other events in people's lives. The housing meeting this research followed was not well attended by the Council Grove community because there were other community events and illnesses. Public engagement has to compete with activities regardless of how strategic the facilities are in planning the date and time of the event. Like this situation, the facilitators did not know that the local high school's basketball team would be successful enough to make the state tournament and that they would play the same night and time as the meeting. Also the facilitators could not plan for a sickness that was spreading through Council Grove at the same time as the meeting, keeping people home rather than attending the meeting. Since the online engagement educational component was attached to the public meeting, the results of tracking online engagement after the meeting is thwarted due to the low attendance rate. An aware person would make the comment that this is the best reason for having online engagement.

discussion

Online engagement allows for the participants to engage at times that are more suited to their needs. Public meeting attendance is controlled by multiple time and situational factors. Lukensmeyer and Torres (2006) point out the environmental, timing, and locational factors that online engagement provides over face-to-face engagement. Participants who use online engagement have the choice of when to engage, where they engage, and the comfortable choice of how to engage. Competing with other activities in their lives is lessened because online engagement allows them to make their own choices and hopefully when they have enough time to truly think about the questions at hand.

This problem is not a single situation phenomena. Almost three weeks after the Council Grove housing meeting, the FHRC hosted another public meeting, this time in Marysville, KS. The meeting was to discuss the Regional Plan the FHRC is currently creating. Similarly to the Council Grove meeting, attendance was below expectation. After some investigation, the FHRC became aware

of two other public meetings being held in Marysville the same night as their meeting. One ended in the middle of the set meeting time, 2 attendees did come from this meeting, and the second one was held during the same timeframe. The competing meetings created a competitive pull for residents of Marysville, reducing attendance at both meetings. Another competitive pull from the meeting was a wrestling tournament that attracted other residents away from Marysville, similar to the Council Grove basketball game. Since small towns are not as populous as bigger cities, these competitive events creates a situation where people have to choose to participate without having the large number of residents to compensate for those who choose not to attend a public meeting.

55 to 64 Should be the Target Age Group

While aging populations are beginning to increase on social media sites and overall online usage, this study has determined that

people 65 and over and who live in rural areas are not ready to utilize online engagement. Of the two participants who took the survey, both indicated that they would not use online engagement, especially pertaining to social media. One of the two didn't have Facebook, and the other has Facebook as their only social media site but using the internet rarely. Both participants also clearly pointed to the "older inhabitants" not using or lacking skills in social media. This was also reinforced by other participants that pointed out a large elderly population who do not use social media or even the internet in their area. At the same time, Council Grove may be different from other older rural areas and their online usage.

While the website does not track the age of people who enter, Facebook does track the age of people who like the Flint Hills pages. 7% of followers on the Flint Hills Regional Council Facebook page are 65 and above. The Flint Hills Frontiers page has 10% of followers falling in the same age category. While these numbers does not seem to

indicate a significant following, compared to the Facebook average, both pages had a higher than normal percentage of 65 and over followers. This seems promising, but at the same time, the 65 and over followers could be located in more urban areas in the region or from outside the region. The data gathered did not give locations for the 65 and over followers.

The age group that did have a more promising presence on social media and their capabilities of online usage was the 55 to 64 age group. Six of the eleven survey participants fell in this age group, the highest attended age group. Four of the six have a Facebook account; three of them said they would participate in online engagement in the future. The two who did not have a Facebook account also indicated that they would participate in future online engagement as well. All participants said they did have internet, two used the internet multiple times a day, three use it daily, and one uses it once a week. When asked about their social media usage, three said they get

discussion

on their social media accounts daily, two said weekly, and one said rarely. When asked how they would assess their social media skills, half indicated they were novices and the other half said they had intermediate skills. 16% of followers from the Flint Hills Regional Council page are from this age group. 16% of followers from the Flint Hills Frontiers page are also from this age group. Both are above the Facebook average as well.

Based on these numbers, this report concludes that the 55 to 64 age group may be more inclined to use online engagement. Within the next ten years this age group will be within the elderly age group. The educational component was designed to introduce meeting participants to online engagement; in the case they were not aware of its presence or its capabilities. This age group also indicated that they were split between novice and intermediate level of social media usage, creating a need to continue education of these processes to them. With their willingness to use public engagement in the future, if the 55 to 64 age group will keep

being educated about how to use this online engagement, maybe its usage will increase in rural areas among the elderly overtime.

People have had many years to become educated on how to participate in face-to-face public meetings. These meetings have facilitators who are teaching or coaching them through the process. Online engagement is different. Without the training or education, it can be intimidating to the user, decreasing the chances of them using it. Continuous education, during a process people have already become accustomed to, may allow for the older age groups who feel intimidated by new technology the courage to use it. Further research into this area may be needed to see if online engagement in rural communities by the elderly will increase over time.

How to Program Online Engagement

The educational tool might get more people to utilize online engagement in rural, aging communities, but during this research project

it became apparent that how the online engagement is presented to people may affect if they respond or not. Of the eleven survey participants, eight indicated they felt that the group discussions or sharing ideas was the most beneficial part of the public meeting. Of the eight, half felt they had strong ownership over the ideas and discussion during the meeting, and half felt they had some ownership of what was discussed during the meeting. Based on Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, participants answers could fall somewhere between Consultation to Partnership. Those that felt they had some ownership over the decision-making process designated that what they contributed to the discussion will be taken into consideration but may not be the major factor in the decision-making process. Those that stated they had strong ownership felt that their ideas and opinions will have a major impact on the decision-making process.

When reflecting on posts on Facebook and the Flint Hills Forum, though the comments and likes were not bountiful in number, distinguishing what posts got responses may enlighten administrators on how to proceed in the future. The Facebook pages have been mostly used to advertise upcoming meetings and events. Occasionally the administrator would post actual questions or stories on what was happening in the Flint Hills. These posts received the most comments and likes from followers. The Flint Hills Forum was a collection of ideas the planning team was sharing to receive input from the residents of the Flint Hills. They did not get much traffic on the site but those that did utilized and contributed their ideas and thoughts, creating a tabletop discussion online.

Presenting questions to resemble more intimate tabletop discussions may generate more participation in online engagement. For the purposes of this research, the post following the meeting was a question that came from the housing questionnaire participants took at the beginning of the meeting. This question was chosen because it was one of the questions that were discussed during the tabletop discussions during the

discussion

public meeting. Though nobody commented or liked the post, it was one of the most viewed posts both pages had over the last few months. More research is needed to understand how to entice people to respond rather than to look at the posts.

Summary

From this final discussion, the key findings that were produced from the research may not have answered the initial research question but they did provide more insight into the topic. Public engagement does compete with other activities in people's lives, and for this case, the research was based on a public meeting that was not well attended, limiting the research's full potential. The age group that was targeted for this project also limited the research, but if the scope is broadened to include those that are close to that target age group, more analysis was available. And last, the research went on the assumption that introducing online engagement was enough to entice people to engage online. However, the presentation of questions online could hinder people from engaging. These conclusions open the door for more areas of research for the future.

conclusion

Public Engagement is a civic tool that can unite a community on issues they face. Rural communities, though civically minded, can be at a disadvantage in this technology booming engagement period. Whether it is through lack of access or dependent on younger ages to amplify online engagement usage, rural communities must either adapt or rely only on face-to-face engagement to discuss civic issues.

Though the research did not provide a conclusive answer to the research question, neither increasing nor decreasing in online engagement after the public meeting, it did provide other insights. Based on the answers from the survey and data from the websites, a better understanding of how people currently use online engagement is attainable.

The Flint Hills Regional Council can look at the analytics for both their website and Facebook accounts to better the impact of what they post. By looking at their currently engaged users habits, the FHRC can begin to accommodate their preferences. Figure 6.4 shows the best time to post articles on Facebook. If the FHRC created a policy to post news on Facebook at that time, theoretically, they could maximize visibility of their posts on Facebook.

One of the biggest limitations that this research faced was the unforeseen competition for attendance. The basketball game and illness created a conflict of interest that diverted the residents from participating in the meeting. While this was not at fault of the FHRC, it limited the number of people exposed to the educational component. This in turn, made the data inconclusive as to whether the educational component did increase online engagement or not.
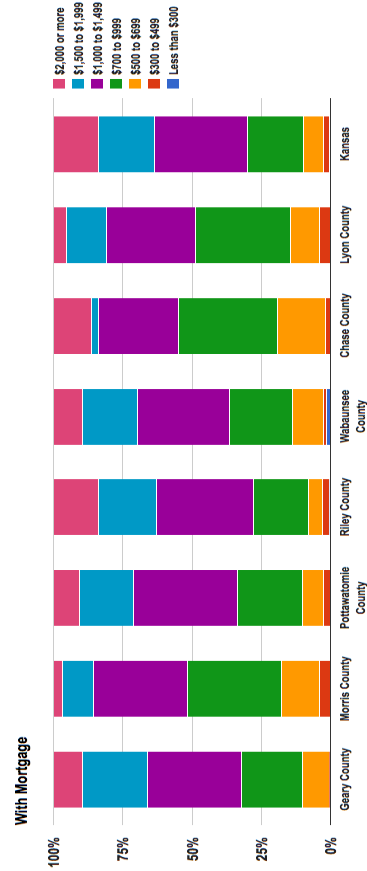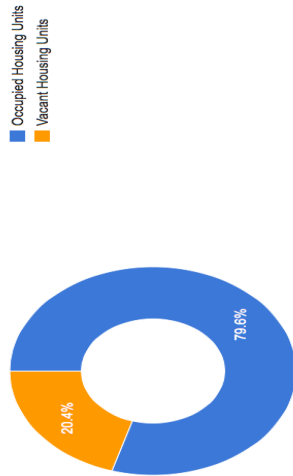
A limitation that was expected from the beginning was whether or not the educational component would be the driver in increasing online engagement. Since there is no way to track if the meeting participants where the ones accessing online, there would have always been doubt on the true achievement of the educational component.
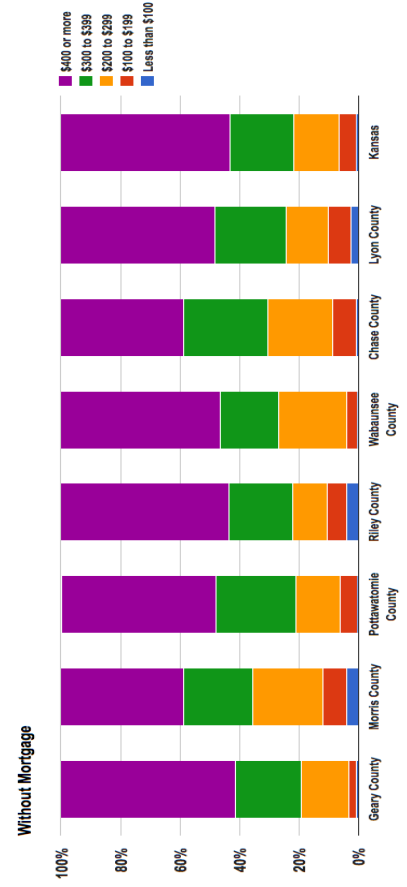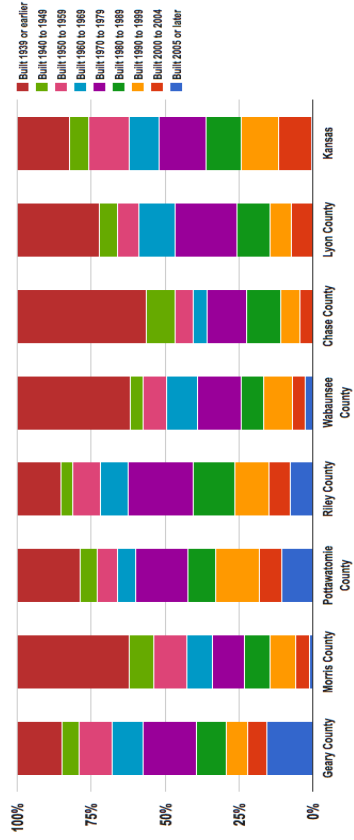
conclusion

The final limitation was the limitations of the data. Since the research required the websites analytics, with some personal observation, the data available was limited to what the websites tracked. This limited the analysis, limiting final conclusions I could make about online engagement.

Public engagement online can provide communities with an opportunity to continue conversations over a long period of time without any physical or time constraints.   Rural communities face challenges incorporating online engagement into their civic discussions. Though the educational component did not increase online engagement for this specific example, the research did establish that rural communities do have access to the internet, residents do have social media accounts, and some residents are open to using both face-to-face engagement and online engagement. While the main research question was inconclusive, the educational component may still be able to educate and increase online engagement.
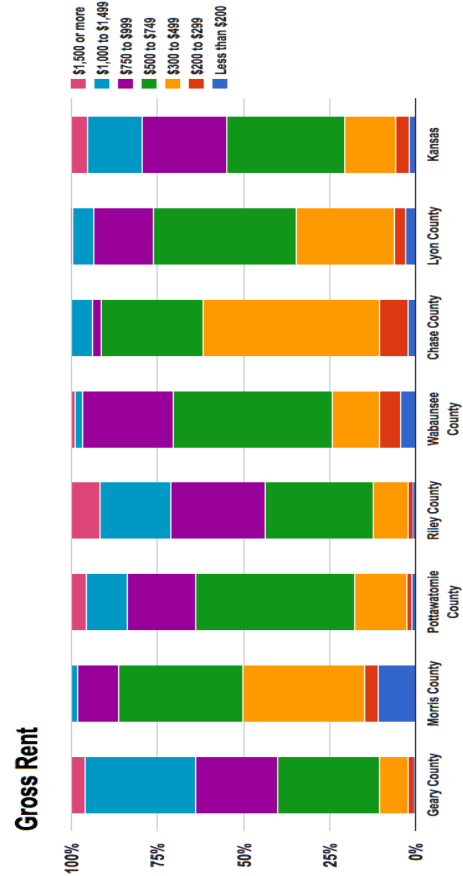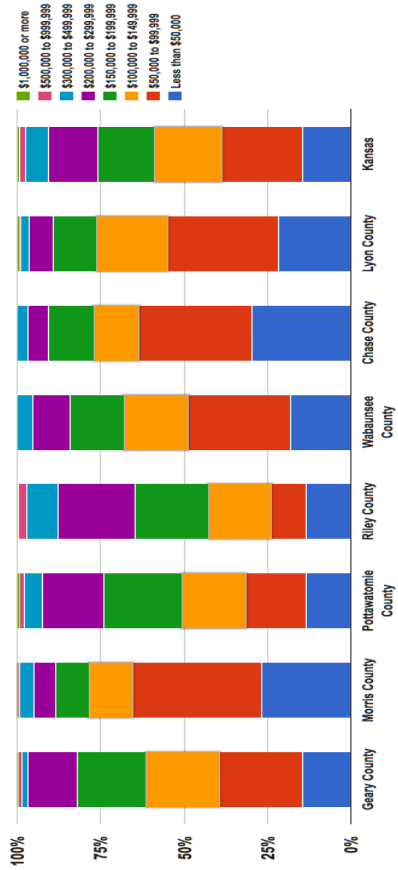
Appendix A: Data Presentaed at Public Meeting

Gross Rent

Public Engagement in Rural, Aging Communities Survey

1. How much do you feel you contributed to the decisions about housing that Flint Hills Regional Council is going to make in the coming months?
   a. Little to no contribution. Engagement was used as a form of education or therapy for participants but I have no feeling of ownership of the decisions that will be made.
   b. Some ownership. I feel some ownership in the sense that I was allowed to communicate my ideas and opinions but I still have a sense that what I communicated will not be a major factor in the decisions that will be made.
   c. Strong ownership. I feel I was taken seriously by the facilitators and my ideas and opinions will have a major impact on the decision making process.

2. In your opinion, what was the most beneficial part of the meeting?
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

3. Do you have access to the Internet at home?
   a. Yes
   b. No

4. How often do you get online?
   a. Never
   b. Once a week
   c. Daily
   d. Multiple times a day

5. What social media do you have an account with??
   a. Facebook
   b. Pinterest
   c. Twitter
   d. LinkedIn
   e. Google Plus
   f. Flickr
   g. FourSquare
   h. Instagram
   i. MeetUp
   j. MySpace
   k. Other _____
   l. I do not have an account on any social media site

6. How often do you use one or more of these social media sites?
   a. Never
   b. Once a week
   c. Daily
   d. Multiple times a day

7. How would you describe your skills for using social media?
   a. Novice
   b. Intermediate
   c. Proficient

8. In your opinion, what may be a hindrance to online usage for public engagement purposes in your area?
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

9. How many public meetings have you attended prior to this meeting?
   a. 0
   b. 1-2
   c. 3-4
   d. More than 5

10. Would you participate in a public meeting in the future?
    a. Yes
    b. No

11. Would you participate in an online forum such as the Flint Hills Frontiers Forum or Facebook site in the future?
    a. Yes
    b. No

12. Age:
    a. 18 or below
    b. 19-34
    c. 35-54
    d. 55-64
    e. 65 or above

13. What would you describe as your place of residence?
    a. Downtown Council Grove
    b. Suburban or outskirts of Council Grove
    c. Rural Morris County
    d. Another town in the Flint Hills
    e. Another rural area in the Flint Hills
    f. Some other place

Appendix C: Survey Results

Survey	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5
Respondent 1	c	group decision-think tank process	a	b	a,d
Respondent 2	b	brainstorming sessions	a	c	a,b
Respondent 3	b	determing county's housing needs	a	c	a
Respondent 4	b	the unity of opinion in terms of need for multifamily housing (low-income) as well as retirement homes	a	c	d,e
Respondent 5	c	sharing ideas, understanding common concerns and issues	a	c	a
Respondent 6	b	listing needs	a	d	l
Respondent 7	c	discussing the need to bring economic development to town so developers might be interested in building housing here	a	c	a,b
Respondent 8	b	discussion groups	a	c	acdej (don't use any regularly)
Respondent 9	b	goal setting, identifying specific items	a	d	i
Respondent 10	c	hearing other opinions and ideas	a	c	a,d
Respondent 11	b	building partnerships	a	d	abcdfk

Question 6	Question 7	Question 8	Question 9	Question 10	Question 11	Question 12	Question 13
b	a	current population-older and less media social	c	a	b	d	b
c	b	older populations dont all have access	d	a	a	c	b
e. (rarely)	a	too many older inhabitants with lack of social media skills	d	a	a. but not facebook	e	c
e. seldom	a	age! again council grove is a defacto retirement community and a very significant number do not use social media	d	a	a	e	f. city lake
c	a	people misunderstanding what you post and in turn causing problems etc., lack of skills to use system	d	a	c. undecided	d	b
a	b	the nail that sticks up gets pounded down	d	a	a	d	b
c	b	many of our elderly (60+) in our community dont use the internet	a	a	a	d	b
e. hardly ever	b		b	c. maybe	c.maybe	c	b
b	a		d	a	a	d	b
c	b	poor internet in area	c	a	a	d	a
d	c		d	a	a	b	d

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