

Priority Issue #6



Volunteerism and civic engagement, particularly among young people, are insufficient to sustain community institutions and services.

Back Story Many public and non-profit institutions in Lycoming County rely heavily on volunteers to provide amenities and services to the citizens of this County. Volunteers fulfill a variety of essential community functions such as serving as local firefighters and EMTs and assisting municipalities on boards such as municipal planning commissions, zoning hearing boards, municipal authorities, and local election boards. Many local non-profit groups also rely on volunteers to achieve their missions. However, volunteerism and civic engagement, particularly among young people, has been an issue of concern since at least the 1980s. As an example, since 1985 the number of fire and EMS volunteers statewide has declined from 152,000 to 70,000. Municipal officials and community leaders at the local level recognize that the declining trend in volunteer involvement is consistent with what they have seen in their municipalities. At least one municipality in the County has reported that they did not have enough manpower to cover EMS responsibilities at all times. A need for more adult volunteers to support social service programs was also identified at the Community Development Focus Group meeting held on April 14, 2016, as part of the development of this plan.

Local appointed boards are filled mostly with older citizens (many of which are in their late 50s and older, according to municipal secretaries within the PATs). While this may not have been a major problem in the past, the issue is becoming more apparent as technology is dividing the population. The issue involves attracting, communicating with, engaging, and retaining the younger generation to serve as volunteers on boards with aging members.

Civic engagement is another area where community leaders identified deficiencies. According to the American Psychological Association, civic engagement can be defined as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern and can take many forms from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation.”^{xxxv} Civic engagement is an important factor in shaping public policy. Effectively engaging a diverse segment of the public (and not just “the usual suspects”) throughout the development of projects results in more community buy-in for that project. However, when citizens are not effectively engaged they can become disenfranchised with local leaders. In the Summer of 2016, PCD staff conducted surveys in Lycoming County as part of preparation for this plan to find out what County residents do and don’t like about the County. “Feelings towards local government” was the second most frequently commented on negative issue (as shown in the Survey Results Graph) and of positive and negative issues it was the fourth most frequently commented on. These comments covered a wide range of the political spectrum and ranged from relatively simple feelings that local government did not listen, to issues related to specific local government business. It’s clear from these comments that many Lycoming County citizens feel disenfranchised by their local government. However, many in local government know that very few people

actually actively participate in local government decision-making in spite of being given many opportunities to do so.

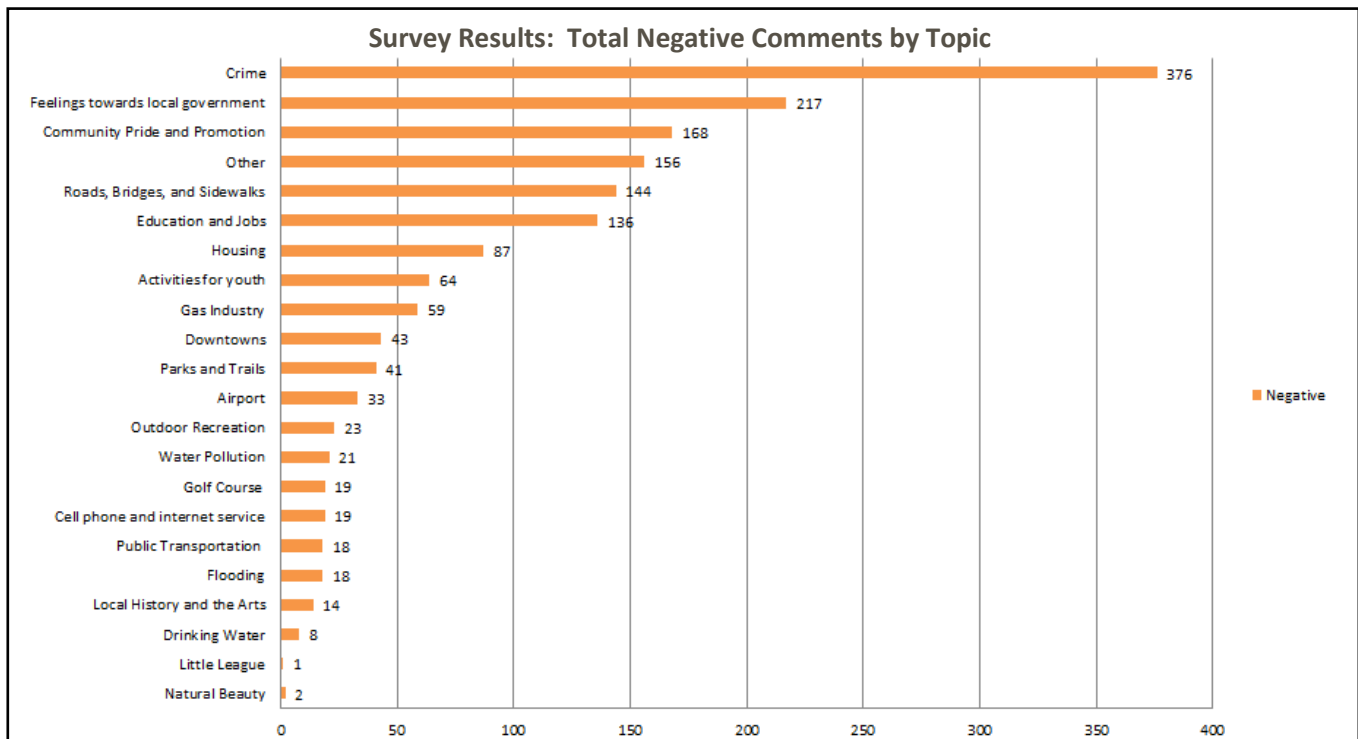


Figure 31: 2016 Comprehensive Plan Outreach Survey Results: Negative Comments by Topic
Source: PCD

Priority Issue Overview While some non-profit and government boards experience a lot of success in finding volunteers, others have struggled. Experience is a valuable commodity on these boards, however, it is also important to ensure that there is board turnover in order to bring fresh ideas into the mix. In order to encourage board turnover, many boards (such as the Lycoming County Planning Commission) opt to enact term limits. Board members should also consider actively recruiting new board members from the community by targeting specific individuals with skillsets which would be valuable to the board and simply asking them to be part of the board.

Civic disengagement is being driven by three main factors in Lycoming County and much of America in general: a lack of knowledge of how the public sphere operates, ineffective communication between institutions and the public, and institutional parochialism.

Lack of knowledge of how the public sphere operates – In spite of the fact that many school curriculums involve civics at some stage of the education process, youth are graduating from school without a sufficient understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and opportunities to affect change of the various levels of government. In April 2016, the Lycoming County Planning Department held a Youth Focus Group meeting that included about 25 students from seven school districts within Lycoming and Sullivan Counties. Students offered many useful insights but also indicated they did not fully

comprehend the roles and responsibilities of local government before the meeting. It's important to understand that educational institutions must be the spearhead of any efforts to address this deficiency. Much of the success of any work to address this issue will hinge on how much the school districts and colleges participate. The task is difficult for educational institutions though, given the complexity and breadth of public sphere operations at the local, state, and federal levels; however, it is critical for students to have a holistic understanding of how the public sphere operates.

Ineffective communication between institutions and the public – According to a report published by the Pew Research Center in 2016, newspaper circulation has declined in 10 out of the last 12 years.^{xxxvi} Meanwhile, the Pew Research Center reported in 2015 that 61% of millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) reported getting political news primarily on Facebook in a given week. In comparison, 60% of Internet-using Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) reported getting political news primarily through local TV.^{xxxvii} So while governmental entities generally communicate through the newspaper, the public is not buying as many newspapers, resulting in a growing communication gap between government and the public. Lack of knowledge about public sphere operations also impacts this issue since people are not even aware of what to pay attention to. It's important to note that while communication patterns are changing, we still need to accommodate other segments of the population who are not changing their communication patterns.

Institutional parochialism – Parochial is defined by Dictionary.com as “very limited or narrow in scope or outlook; provincial.” In regards to this plan, the term *Institutional Parochialism* is intended to convey an idea that there are some institutions (government and non-profit) which are not open to change or influence from outside. This can be for a variety of reasons - such as not wanting to give up power - to not believing that others are capable or willing to do the job. Whatever the reasons, this is a problem which has been identified in multiple outreach areas throughout the development of the plan. The issue is even documented in the 2006 Comprehensive Plan. This issue was also mentioned frequently in the survey comments with people expressing a desire for government officials to work together to solve problems, bemoaning the lack of engagement from political leaders, and complaining leadership not being inclusive of outside opinions. The Youth Focus Group said that “they feel the older generations do not always understand their perspective.” The problem was even identified by community leaders during the development of this plan specifically during the SWOT analysis exercises conducted during the development of the six multi-municipal plans.

Some community leaders may believe that the public does not want to engage since they do not take advantage of the existing engagement opportunities, however, the survey comments are clear that this is not the case and that the public wants leadership to engage them more in decision-making processes. The Youth Focus Group also offered a few insights which indicate that they are ready to be engaged by leadership.

- They believe the single greatest way to make a difference in their community was through active participation in local government.
- They wanted the older generations to know that they are ready to step up into leadership positions in government and in the community.

- They are confident in their ability and interest in doing so.

Public engagement is frequently a requirement of much of government's work, however, these laws usually require public input at public meetings, occurring sometimes after much of the work has already been done planning a project. At this point soliciting public input is little more than checking a box and it serves more to make government transparent than it does to improve civic engagement. In order to more effectively engage the public it is important to understand what civic engagement is not. Civic engagement is not: selling an idea, program, or policy to the public; convincing people to support a plan or idea of the staff or council; a meeting where people gather to complain, blame, or find fault; gathering more or different people only to have the same old discussions; a process where the staff or council always controls the outcome; or lobbying the elected body. Instead, civic engagement is about citizens talking to citizens. The role of staff or elected officials is to pose the right questions, listen, and learn from the public. It's important to understand that civic engagement does not, cannot, and will not happen at a council or planning commission meeting. These types of meetings are the community's business meetings and are usually too late to get effective public feedback. However, if there is good civic engagement prior to meetings, these institutions will have a more productive community business meeting.

Building a strong culture of civic engagement in community institutions can have widespread benefits to the institution, individual, and community as a whole, as illustrated in Figure 32 on the next page. These benefits go far beyond creating a better government process. They also impact the economy and the wellbeing of the citizens.

Community leaders need to recognize when they are being impacted by Institutional Parochialism and be more open to change and outside opinions. Community leaders can improve this by actively recruiting volunteers to serve on boards and being willing to implement the projects in this section. Implementation of these projects will likely be difficult and may not yield considerable results at first, but it is important for community leaders to not be discouraged by lack of public involvement or negative public feedback. Eventually, we will cultivate a strong culture of civic engagement which will take root in our community for the benefit of the greater good.

The following two strategic approaches were identified throughout the development of this plan to address this issue:

- Utilizing social media and the Internet to engage public
- Actively recruiting volunteers

Benefits of Civic Engagement

Institutional Benefits of Civic Engagement

- Achieving greater buy-in to decisions with fewer backlashes such as lawsuits, special elections, or a council recall.
- Engendering trust between citizens and government, which improves public behavior at public meetings.
- Attaining successful outcomes on toxic issues, which helps elected officials avoid choosing between equally unappealing solutions.
- Developing better and more creative ideas and solutions.
- Implementing ideas, programs, and policies faster and more easily.
- Creating involved citizens instead of demanding customers.
- Building community within a city.
- Making your job easier and more satisfying.

Source: [*How Civic Engagement Transforms Community Relationships by ICMA*](#)

Individual Benefits of Civic Engagement

- Youth who develop meaningful positive relationships with other adults in the community have demonstrated better social and emotional development.
- When youth become engaged in community activities they develop the skills needed to be an effective leader and show better problem-solving and decision-making skills.
- Youth who volunteer at least one hour per week are 50% less likely to become pregnant as a teen, abuse drugs/alcohol/tobacco, drop out of school, or adopt other destructive or criminal behavior.
- Promotes Self-Determination and Self-Efficacy.
- College students who participate in service learning projects were likely to see an increase in GPA.
- Volunteering enhances various skills resulting in expanded career path.

Sources: [*The Positive Effects of Youth Community Engagement*](#)
[*The Effects of Volunteering on the Volunteer*](#)

Community Benefits of Civic Engagement

- Communities where youth are surrounded by adult support are more likely to be able to support youth in times of need.
- Communities that engage youth in government are frequently rated among the top places for young people to live and are more attractive to business.
- Youth who engage in the community develop better social networks and are less likely to relocate.
- Pennsylvanians provided 338.83 million hours of volunteer service in 2015 for a total value of \$7.7 billion of service contributed.

Sources: *Authentic Youth Civic Engagement by National League of Cities*
[*The Positive Effects of Youth Community Engagement*](#)
[*The Effects of Volunteering on the Volunteer*](#)

Figure 32: Benefits of Civic Engagement
Source: PCD

Key Implications

Lycoming County's population peaked at the turn of the 21st Century and since that time has been shrinking. This in itself is not alarming, however, of particular note is that the population cohort under 18 has seen the most dramatic reduction, with an almost 50% decrease since 1960. This continuing population trend may have serious consequences, so it is important to understand how we are interacting with this age group, and become more effective in our communications with them.

Attracting and engaging youth requires an adjustment in how the local boards communicate with the communities they serve. The Internet is pulling younger people away from traditional local news outlets, thus local governments are

losing one of their most effective methods for communicating with their citizens. Institutions within this County communicate mostly through the newspaper (which in most cases is required by law). Online presence varies between municipalities where some utilize their website and social media while others do not have any online presence. Even for those already with an online presence there is still plenty of room for improvement to learn how to best utilize these tools to improve communication and civic engagement.

As the means of communication change, citizens not inclined to use traditional means may become less informed on important local decisions and may miss the opportunity to voice their concerns and participate in government decision-making before a program or project is implemented. Yet, there is evidence that youth want to be actively engaged. As stated at the Youth Focus Group, the high school students expressed a desire to be informed, present, and involved in the decision-making process with local government and educational institutions.

While the structure of local government in Pennsylvania presents some challenges for providing services, it also provides the key benefit of allowing citizens to directly participate in local government decision-making by serving on boards and voicing their concerns directly to government representatives. However, if local governments are not effectively communicating with their citizens, and civic engagement continues to decline,

50 Year Lycoming County Population Trend

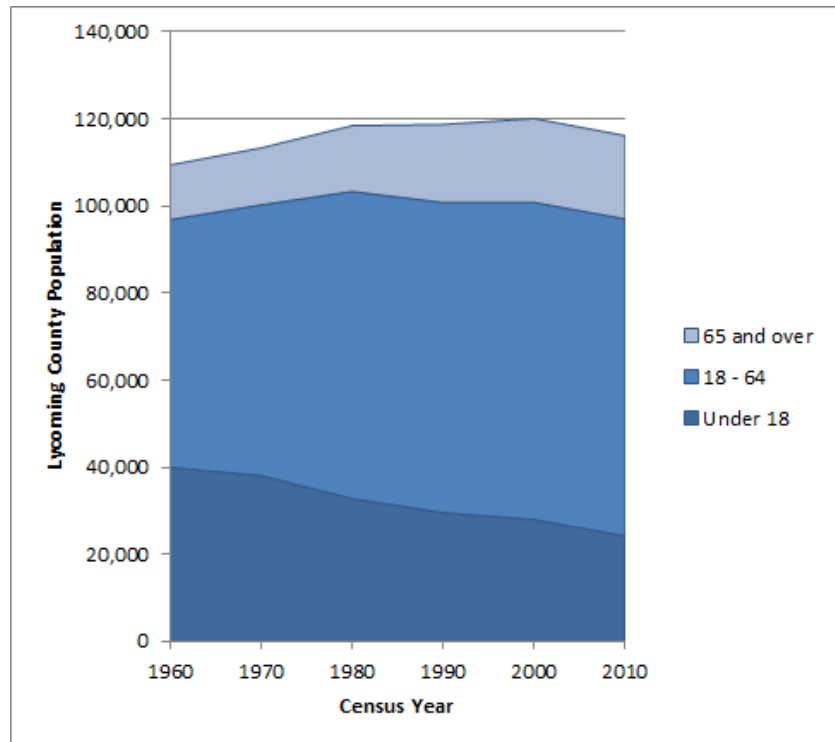


Figure 33: 50 Year Lycoming County Population Trend
Source: PCD

then these benefits will rapidly diminish. Local government officials need to find solutions to solve this problem so that this local government structure remains relevant in the 21st Century.

Project of Countywide Significance for this Issue

CREATE A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE TO DEVELOP A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TOOLBOX

The intent of this project is to provide a set of tools which community leaders can utilize to improve civic engagement and attract more volunteers. Some of the research completed will be available to government, non-profits, and businesses to utilize however they see as appropriate for their operation. Others involve specific programs to be implemented with the assistance of County Planning and other agencies. In order to begin this project, a Project Delivery Team (PDT) must be assembled involving representatives from the recommended partners below. The PDT will create a strategy to complete the programs listed below and also consider other opportunities for improved engagement.

HOW PROJECT ADDRESSES THE ISSUE

The PDT will help foster the development of these key initiatives listed below but will also be responsible for considering other opportunities to engage the public. The programs each address one of the three factors of disengagement mentioned in the last section. The intention is to cultivate a culture of civic engagement to strengthen our community and capture as many of the benefits which were previously identified as possible.

The Youth Ambassador Program This program would involve partnering with local school districts and municipal and non-profit boards. The intent is to create board positions for students to serve on. These programs already exist throughout the United States and even in this County with strong results. The Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs (PSAB) promotes a youth program titled the Junior Council Person Program which seeks to appoint local high school and college students to serve on boards. These board positions could have full voting powers or the students could act more as an advisor to the board. Board positions would typically only last one year to encourage turnover. According to a report published in November 2011 by the Center for the Study of Social Policy titled “Promoting Youth Civic Engagement,” youth civic engagement leads to reduced risky behavior, increased success in school,

The City of Lacey, Washington has implemented a program that allows for high school students to act as full-voting members of their Board of Park Commissioners, the Lacey Historical Commission, and the Lacey Library Board.

Lacey, Washington high school students who wish to serve as full-voting member of their Board of Park Commissioners, the Lacey Historical Commission, and the Lacey Library Board must meet the following criteria: 16 years of age by September 1st of the respective term year; a resident of the City of Lacey or the Lacey Urban Growth Area; attend a school (public, private, or homeschool) within the North Thurston School District; and be able to attend monthly board meetings, occasional joint planning sessions, and appropriate preparation time. Upon election, the Youth Commissioner is given equal powers to standard Commissioners, except for counting towards a quorum. Students may serve two consecutive 1-year terms on a given board or run for a separate commission position in the second year. This program has been seen as a success in Lacey. The Board of Park Commissioners has seen a Youth Commissioner serve as the Vice-Chair of the Board since 2015. Exit statements by three of the most recent “retired” Youth Commissioners have indicated the program has helped prepare them for college.

Source: www.ci.lacey.wa.us

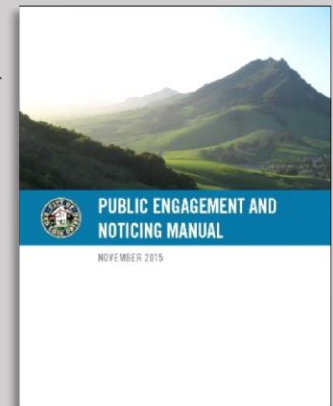
and greater civic participation later in life. Also stated in the report was that “children and teens who have opportunities for involvement in extracurricular activities and community institutions are more likely to vote and participate in other forms of civic engagement as young adults.” (Center for the Study of Social Policy 2011) Additionally, a report published by the National League of Cities in 2010 titled “Authentic Youth Civic Engagement” noted that, “youth input can redirect city investments away from programs and facilities that would be underutilized into areas that reflect the needs of youth and their families.” (National League of Cities 2010) In addition to these benefits, the report also indicates who youth that participate in youth civic engagement programs are more likely to graduate, adopt productive attitudes about their role in the community, and avoid risky behavior. In addition, communities that engage youth in government are frequently rated among the top places for young people to live and are more attractive to businesses. Interested municipalities could utilize the PSAB Junior Council Person Program as a framework for building their own program.

Public Participation Plan The Public Participation Plan would outline best management practices for engaging and communicating with the general public. Different engagement strategies should be identified depending on what needs to be accomplished. Sometimes the institution may wish to:

- Inform the citizens about new services and programs, upcoming events in the community, or temporary service disruptions
- Consult with the public to gather information or opinions from citizens
- Collaborate with the public to identify alternatives and creative ideas to address community-wide concerns

Specific protocols should be developed so that institutions will know how best to engage the public to achieve maximum results. One specific area that the committee should focus on would be the expanded use of social media to engage the public.

In November 2015, the City of San Luis Obispo in California adopted a Public Engagement and Noticing Manual to provide guidance to various departments within the City on how to best engage the public. The manual identifies best practices depending on whether the communication objective is to inform, consult, or collaborate. The Montoursville-Muncy Public and Youth Engagement Committee could use this manual as a template for their own guidance documentation.



Source: slocity.org

Social Media Engagement Coalition Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter utilize algorithms to determine what users see. Learning how to use these digital tools to reach a wider audience should be an important aspect of the Public Participation Plan. This project will build off of the social media strategies identified by the Public Participation Plan. The idea is to create a coalition of governments, non-profits, and businesses who collaborate on social media to reach a wider audience. These entities will be encouraged (but not required) to support the work of other entities by sharing their content. By sharing the content of another organization, you are allowing their message to disseminate to your audience thereby

increasing reach. If used correctly, entities will be able to reach a far wider audience allowing more of the public to hear their message and become engaged.

Volunteer Fair This program would be an annual event where people interested in volunteering could meet volunteer organizations from around the County and sign up to participate. The Volunteer Fair could be held at a locations such as Lycoming College and Pennsylvania College of Technology (PCT) in order to recruit youth and encourage them to stay in the area. An effective marketing campaign will be crucial in the development of this program. Tools developed under the Public Participation Plan and by the Social Media Engagement Coalition will be instrumental in marketing this event. Already existing is the Penn College Youth Leadership Program which recruits volunteers from PCT. Also existing is the Non-Profit PM Exchange series run by the Williamsport/Lycoming Chamber of Commerce. These existing programs could be important building blocks for this project.

Volunteer Booklet This project involves the development of a Volunteer Booklet which could be made available to people looking for volunteer organizations within their community. The Volunteer Booklet will contain key information about volunteer organizations including: organization name, organization leadership, organization's contact information, and a summary of the purpose of the organization. The difficult part will be disseminating the Volunteer Booklet to the people who need it. In order to assist with this, organizations such as the colleges could disseminate the booklet to their students while the Williamsport/Lycoming Chamber of Commerce could coordinate with local businesses to make them available to their new employees.

Community Event Calendar This project will involve the development of a Community Event Calendar in order to inform the public about community events. The calendar should include events such as government meetings, community events, and business events. As with the Volunteer Fair, an effective marketing campaign will be crucial to the success of the Community Event Calendar. The development of an app-based calendar would be ideal with the opportunity for users to filter content by their areas of interest including organizations and types of activities. If successful, the calendar could help facilitate the creation of new networks among individuals with shared interests resulting in a stronger community. It could also promote civic engagement by better informing citizens of important public discussions. Local businesses could also benefit by attracting more people to events such as First Fridays. The James V. Brown Library has a community event calendar on their website, however, this calendar is not consistently populated with information about community events outside of the library. This project could consider expanding on the existing community calendar with the library.

Continue Youth Plan the Future This will be an ongoing Planning Department initiative building off the success of the Youth Focus Group referenced earlier in this section. Students and planners both found immense value in the first meeting. It would be beneficial to continue this work to inform students about their communities as well as generating much needed feedback from an extremely important segment of the population. Future youth outreach initiatives could take many forms. A few students could be provided the opportunity to come to the County offices as they did previously to take part in a discussion about County operations. Planning staff could also travel to schools to present more focused information to a wider audience.

The objective is to teach youth about how government operates and hopefully improve overall civic engagement and volunteerism.

PROJECT LEADERSHIP

County of Lycoming, School Districts of Lycoming County, Lycoming College, Pennsylvania College of Technology (PCT), First Community Foundation Partnership (FCFP), Williamsport/Lycoming Chamber of Commerce (WLCC), and the James V. Brown Library are the main partners who should be involved in this project, however, engagement from many institutions (public and private) will lead to a better outcome.