

What Kind of Public Involvement Does Bermuda Need?

In an age when communication is faster and more far-reaching than ever before, public discourse in Bermuda seems stuck. We keep hearing the same angry voices, talking in circles without making progress; we lack the information and explanation we need to understand issues clearly; and we don't have effective structures or strategies in place to help citizens and stakeholders engage issues, or inform and implement solutions to shared problems. Under these circumstances, gaps between leaders and the public are vast, and trust and community spirit are eroded. At a time when Bermuda faces many critical issues, it is essential to establish ways for citizens and leaders to work together effectively and develop a common agenda for progress.

A critical question in establishing a more productive culture of public problem solving in Bermuda is this: What is the right role for the public to play in public life? To help you and your neighbors think and talk about this critical topic, this discussion guide presents three approaches, each with its own pros and cons. Which approach do you think would best serve Bermuda's needs, and why?

Questions to Consider for Each Approach

Keep in mind the following questions as you discuss each of the approaches:

- 1)** Could this approach add real value to our community? For example, what kinds of gains could we make if we focused our efforts here? How might it help our community solve problems or transform or overcome existing conflicts?
- 2)** Do we have access to the information, capacity and resources to adopt this approach?
- 3)** What are the obstacles that might prevent us from using or making the most of it?
- 4)** Are there certain issues or situations where this approach would be particularly appropriate?
- 5)** What are the limitations of this approach that we need to be aware of?

Approach 1: Public Consultation

Citizens should have meaningful opportunities to offer informed input on government decisions

Given Bermuda's colonial background, government decisions are too often made behind closed doors without citizens having the chance to voice their opinions. We should focus our efforts on creating opportunities for citizens to make meaningful contributions to important decisions about our community and make sure that those in power hear our views.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Create web sites where citizens can get information about public policies that are being developed and where citizens can comment on public policy decisions.
- Pass laws requiring the government to consult with citizens on important decisions, like budgeting, education policy or land use.
- Train government officials and others to hold public hearings where citizens can deliberate together about decisions that affect them and offer their input for officials to consider.

People who like this approach might say things like,

“Nobody knows how the shoe pinches like the person wearing it, so citizens should have a chance to inform government officials about the problems that directly affect them. Public consultation methods give busy citizens an efficient opportunity to do so.”

People who don't like this approach might say things like,

“Is this approach real or cosmetic? Will it actually give all our citizens a true voice and have significant impacts on policy or just create the illusion of input after which decisions will be made the same way as always?”

Approach 2: Public and Community Engagement

Citizens and community-based organizations should be encouraged and empowered to be active partners in problem-solving

While providing informed input to government decisions is important, it's not enough. Too often, government can't or won't do all that needs to be done to address longstanding problems, such as equal access to opportunity. Public deliberation should therefore serve as more than a source of information offered to government leaders to take or leave as they choose. It should also serve as a means to inform, invite and inspire citizens to greater participation, to spur new collaborations among community-based organizations and to create greater accountability of public officials.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Train community leaders and government officials in the principles and practices of sound public engagement, including how to determine community priorities, frame issues for deliberation and engage the public or particular stakeholders in productive dialogue, etc.
- Regularly convene public forums where citizens can deliberate together about decisions that affect them and use those deliberations to inform public policy, encourage new partnerships among community-based organizations and create opportunities for citizens to play a greater role in solutions.
- Create interactive online platforms that not only help citizens learn more about issues, but also support collaboration among citizens and organizations who are working toward solutions.

People who like this approach might say things like,

"We cannot expect government to solve all our problems, even with more informed input from citizens. Individuals, groups and organizations must play an active role as well, or too many issues will remain unresolved."

People who don't like this approach might say things like,

"It's nice to think that citizens could play a bigger role in public life, but the fact is that most people don't have the time, desire or knowledge to do anything other than vote for someone to represent them."

Approach 3: Community Organizing

Citizens should be better organized and mobilized to challenge prevailing power structures and demand change

Because of deep structural inequities, providing more input, encouraging new partnerships and the like are like putting a band-aid on a gaping wound. When it comes to the most serious problems facing our community, we already know what needs to be done and that is to fight for more just laws and their fair and rigorous implementation. We should not be distracted by half-measures, but should concentrate on getting people mobilized to demand and fight for the changes that are needed.

Therefore:

- Community leaders should initiate information campaigns to help people understand the obstacles to a more just society and the ways they can join the fight for needed change.
- Leaders should organize rallies, demonstrations and other forms of peaceful protest that call attention to inequality and pressures officials and the legal system to make change.
- Citizen-activists should be recruited and cultivated as grassroots leaders to mobilize their neighbors to sign petitions, show up at rallies and demonstrations and generally advocate for a more just society.

People who like this approach might say things like,

“We need action, not endless talk that will only lead to frustration or, worse, complacency by creating an illusion that something meaningful is happening.”

People who don't like this approach might say things like,

“Unfortunately, the answers to our challenges are not nearly as obvious as this approach assumes. Rather, they must be worked out through a more productive and democratic public engagement or consultation process. While it may feel like we've talked enough, the truth is that most of the time people are preaching to their respective choirs or else shouting at those with whom they disagree.”

The Approaches in Brief

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Questions to Consider:

- 1) Could this approach add real value to our community? For example, what kinds of gains could we make if we focused our efforts here? How might it help our community solve problems or transform or overcome existing conflicts?
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