

Locality: Montgomery County, Virginia
Department: Montgomery County Public Information Office
Program title: Montgomery-Christiansburg Citizens Academy
Category: Communications

Overview

The Montgomery County Board of Supervisors and the Christiansburg Town Council participated in separate retreats where the elected bodies both decided on a common goal: improving citizen participation and knowledge about how local government works and the services it provides.

The result: an innovative partnership by town-county staffs to offer the first Montgomery-Christiansburg Citizens Academy in fall 2011.

Both local governments faced the shared challenge of how to explain to citizens the differences and overlapping services provided by the town and county governments. As home to two of the five largest towns in Virginia, Montgomery County was in an especially unique situation since many county residents are town residents and vice versa – thoroughly confusing not only citizens but the news media and many other entities as well.

The resulting M-C Citizens Academy offers a great lesson in intergovernmental cooperation and a model for other localities to follow in promoting regional cooperation. The inaugural academy also led to another first in the region. In cooperation with Virginia Tech, the first Montgomery-Blacksburg-Christiansburg Citizens Academy was held this past spring at VT CLASS (Creative Learning Academy for Senior Scholars).

Challenge

The Montgomery County Board of Supervisors held its first retreat in the summer of 2010 to create a vision statement that conveyed its collective leadership to the community and give citizens and county staff members an inspiring sense of the Board's direction for the future.

The Board's 2020 Vision Statement focused on key aspirations to provide stewardship for the county's resources as well as a blueprint for the future. An important goal included the Board's desire to be a citizen friendly government that "strives to be friendly with highly professional, competent and willing staff members who are eager to help all citizens for the overall good of the county."

Following the 2020 Vision Retreat, County Administrator Craig Meadows and members of his executive staff brainstormed ideas to turn the Board's vision into reality through a work plan. As a result, it was decided that a Citizens Academy would enhance existing efforts to provide education, address questions and misconceptions, and encourage civic involvement.

The Christiansburg Town Council also was meeting to establish goals for the town that would fulfill its mission of "progressive small town living at its best." The resulting "Vision 2020" document outlines nine distinct areas of focus, including building a town of "well informed and effectively engaged citizens." Specific tasks and initiatives were developed cooperatively between Council and staff as a means to move the town closer to this vision.

At the time, the Town was battling a reputation of being less than accessible and some members of the community were vocal in their belief that citizen participation was unwelcome. Thus, Christiansburg's foremost order of business was hiring its first-ever public relations officer. As a means to begin building the better informed and engaged community desired by the Town Council, the public relations officer was given latitude to develop communication methods

and programming that would improve information flow and connect the community with their local government. Providing citizens who desired to learn more about Christiansburg's government with an in-depth Citizens Academy experience fit in well with the aim of the public relations office and created an opportunity to show the community that their interest and participation were, indeed, welcome.

Solution

Montgomery County and its two incorporated towns participate in many regional efforts to share resources, minimize costs and provide more effective services to citizens. For these reasons, it naturally made sense for the Christiansburg's Public Relations Officer and the county's Director of Public Information to consider partnering on a citizens academy. Additionally, the joint academy would provide a unique opportunity for citizens to hear and see town and county staffs working cooperatively to explain, compare and contrast the services and operations of each local government.

The planning for the courses kept several guiding principles in mind: each locality would be equally represented as much as possible, with speakers from both localities, and classes held in town and county facilities. A paramount goal also was also try to make each class lively and the topics engaging.

The Town of Blacksburg's Community Relations Director supported these efforts by sharing ideas and materials gleaned from many years of offering its own citizens institute. In addition, Blacksburg Transit hosted and taught the class on public transit.

Implementation and cost

The Montgomery-Christiansburg Citizens Academy was offered free of charge to any Montgomery County resident at least 18 years of age. During enrollment, the academy quickly achieved its maximum of 20 participants for the classes, including couples, singles, and citizens ranging in age from the 20s to 70s. A town police officer and IT specialist from the county also joined the class to learn more about the organizations where they work.

Classes were held on Mondays, Aug. 1 – Sept. 19 from 6 to 8 p.m. Expenses were kept to a minimum. Handouts provided by each speaker were placed in 3 ring notebooks, and the cost of snacks and other supplies were shared by the local governments.

Staff members from the County and the Town taught classes about the following topics:

- Government 101 – an overview of how local government works – taught by then Interim Town Manager Barry Helms and County Administrator Craig Meadows
- Law Enforcement – keeping our community safe – a visit by K9 squad officer “Dozer” was the highlight of this evening
- Planning, Zoning and Public Works – working together for an organized society.

Students visited the town’s public works complex where road signs are made and mountains of salt stored to treat wintry roads

- Fire and Rescue – our first responders. An optional ride around the block on a county fire engine kept some students beyond class hours.
- Economic Development, Tourism and Transit – business and travel in our area. Students posed for photos in front of a public transit bus with each individual’s name on the marquee and operated a virtual driving console.

- Parks and Recreation – the County and Town at play! A few brave souls took an up-close view from the high diving platform of the town’s indoor competition pool.
- Graduation and reception -- Christiansburg Mayor Richard Ballengee and Board of Supervisors Chair Jim Politis presided over the ceremony and presented graduation certificates.

As you can see from the above, the classes were held in a variety of venues, from the county’s Government Center to Town Hall, the Elliston Volunteer Fire Department where the ladies auxiliary cooked dinner for the students and the Aquatic Center, where pizza and drinks were served.

Results

At the graduation ceremony, friends, family and some instructors gathered to honor the class participants.

“The 20 students who sit before us amongst their family and friends are the first ever graduates of what we hope will become a long-running and successful academy,” Town Mayor Richard Ballengee told the graduates. “The goal in offering this program was to help give each of you a better understanding of the breadth and depth of programs and services offered by your local governments, as well as offer insight into why we do some of the things we do and the challenges faced in trying to deliver the best we can to our communities.”

County Board of Supervisors Chair Jim Politis also congratulated the class for “leading the way for future Academy classes. We challenge you to take the knowledge you’ve gained through this experience and put it to use, whether that be running for elected office or applying to

serve on a board or commission in the future or simply talking to your friends or neighbors about some of the things you've learned."

The best evaluators of the Citizens Academy however, are the students themselves. In an on-line survey, 100 percent of the respondents indicated the information presented was either very or extremely useful and all were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the Academy. In addition 92 percent of respondents were extremely or very likely to recommend the Academy to others.

Here are some of their comments:

"We appreciate the open and close interworking of all those involved with Town and County Government positions that share in services, ideas, facilities, equipment, and manpower for the improvement and safety to the public....We applaud you. Being new to the area, our eyes have been opened by this Academy and we recommend this course to every taxpayer."

"I would highly recommend this program to other town residents as a valuable resource to understanding local government."

"I am thrilled to have been part of the 1st Christiansburg Academy! As a resident of Christiansburg, it is exciting to be engaged with our local government on a more personal/intimate basis. Thank you for your efforts & allowing me to take part!"

Plans are already in progress to offer the second M-C Citizens Academy in 2012, using lessons learned and incorporating suggestions and ideas from the surveys students completed at the end of each session.

In addition, the county, both towns and the public schools agreed to offer the joint citizens academy at the Virginia Tech outreach program for senior citizens this spring. It marked the first time all of these entities teamed up to help teach citizens about their community, building and expanding on the success of the Citizens Academy sponsored by Christiansburg and Montgomery County.

