

April 11, 2016



TO: The City of Snohomish

FR: Strategies 360 Research

RE: Snohomish City Residents and Their Government: Improving Communications and Increasing Engagement

Strategies 360 conducted this opinion research to help the government of the City of Snohomish better communicate with and engage its residents. The research was conducted between March 9 and April 1, 2016 using a multi-phased qualitative approach. First, two in-person focus groups were held at Fieldwork, a market research facility in Kirkland, Washington. These were followed by eight in-depth interviews conducted over the phone with individuals from the City of Snohomish, allowing for a deeper discussion of some of the issues discussed and raised during the focus group phase. Both the focus groups and in-depth interviews were segmented by age, with one group of residents ages 25-45 (one focus group; four interviews) and the second group ages 46-76 (one focus group; four interviews). Both methodologies included a mix of gender, occupation, household income level, and education, along with other demographics.

The following key findings and strategic recommendations are based on a meta-analysis of both phases of the research.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a time when people's impressions of national political institutions continue to hover at their nadir and distrust in government remains extremely high, the goal of creating a more active, engaged relationship between the City of Snohomish government and its citizenry is no easy task. In many ways, this has less to do with any specific perceptions or actions of the Snohomish government itself, and more to do with the nearly universal truth that when it comes to local government, most citizens fall into in one of two categories: disengaged or disaffected. Moreover, disaffection is often a prerequisite for involvement, creating the propensity for an inverse relationship between engagement and positive outcomes. In other words, it is hard for any government—not just Snohomish—to motivate people to get involved, and when people do engage they are often already disgruntled.

While these dynamics are most certainly present in Snohomish, this research clearly illuminates a path toward strengthening the bond between Snohomish residents and their government. People are able to identify several positive dimensions of city government, and perhaps more instructively, to give clear voice to the sources of their discontent. This allows for an understanding of how to

capitalize on the positive elements and address the negatives, with the end goal of improving communications and engagement between the Snohomish city government and its residents.

Several overarching themes set the stage for the key findings and strategic recommendations that follow in this memo:

- **A knowledge gap leads to little intersection between the Snohomish city government and people's everyday lives.** There is no doubt that a significant amount of this disconnect is a direct result to people's lack of knowledge or general unwillingness to engage in anything. Among all but the most active citizens, there is only a vague understanding of what comprises city government, much less what it does on a day-to-day basis. Irrespective of the cause, the goal of increasing engagement is virtually impossible without making government more relevant to people's daily lives. This memo offers several recommendations for deepening the connection between Snohomish residents and the local government.
- **For the most part, the relationship between City Hall and city residents is transactional; at worst, it is adversarial.** This is in many ways a function of the services that the City of Snohomish government is tasked with providing, rather than any fault of city government (though it is worth noting that residents do not distinguish between the various institutions that comprise their understanding of local government, from City Hall to the PUD to school districts to county government). Regardless, most of residents' dealings with government revolve around having an issue and trying to get it resolved, rather than a proactive approach to bettering the community. However, people are open to—even looking for—more interaction with city government. In some ways, the bar for this interaction is actually fairly low in—simply opening the door to people more loudly and forcefully can help, as they have virtually no awareness of the local government's current outreach attempts. For instance, they know that public meetings occur and are open to the general public, but they do not feel like city government actively solicits their opinion by making a real effort to bring them into those meetings. They want to feel invited into the process. However, the citizens of Snohomish are not the ones who are going to initiate this interaction, at least not until they have a problem with City Hall. Therefore, they are putting the onus on the government to come to them, and to come to them in a way that cuts through the clutter of their everyday lives (this is discussed in more detail as a prime focus on this report). At the end of the day, in the absence of the establishment of a stronger partnership that clearly brings people in, increasing engagement is a difficult mountain to climb.
- **A very real populist streak defines the relationship between city government and the people of Snohomish.** Whether warranted or not, the entry point for most residents is a perception of city government as more adversary than ally. This is rooted primarily in the belief that local government favors the moneyed special interests over regular people. Residents paint a clear picture of backroom deals, a good ol' boy network, and a pay-to-play system that benefits the (unidentified) few at the expense of everyone else. While this almost certainly has roots in a more generalized negative perception of government writ large—indeed, people cannot name *who* these special interests are—it is quite heavily embedded in

people's minds nonetheless. This dynamic will continue to put distance between city government and Snohomish residents until addressed in an affirmative, proactive manner.

- **Communications and engagement are two separate entities.** Indeed, the former is a prerequisite for the latter. People are not going to engage without more effective communications, but simply communicating *at* them is not enough to result in engagement.

Against this backdrop, fostering a more involved, engaged citizenry is no easy feat. An expectation of large-scale and immediate shifts is likely out of alignment with what is possible—change will not happen overnight or without a significant investment of time and resources.

However, the Snohomish city government has real opportunities to alter the dynamics of their relationship with local residents in a positive way. The rest of this memo details these core dynamics in greater depth, followed by a set of actionable recommendations for accomplishing the City of Snohomish's goals of improving communications and increasing engagement.

KEY FINDINGS

Perceptions of Snohomish City Government

Residents' views toward city government are multifaceted and nuanced, and include both positive and negative elements. However, as is often the case with perceptions of any government, the positive dimensions tend to be softer than the critiques. The net effect is that despite some positive reviews, the entry point into the dialogue for most people is a view of local government as either distant, or as more adversary than ally, stemming centrally from a high level of distrust and populist discontent.

Quality of life in Snohomish is high and people give local government some credit for supporting and facilitating that. However, the lack of a real understanding of the city government's role—and its accomplishments—limits that praise. Meanwhile, certain perceived failings generate deeper emotion. Overall, Snohomish is a good place to live—people are not looking to get out, nor do they harbor major concerns about the direction things are headed. People stay here or move here for a reason, and in general, the promise of that quality of life is being kept by a city government that is up to the task of performing its core responsibilities. In particular, the city receives high marks for public safety (despite tangential concerns about drugs), cleanliness, and the general maintenance of facilities. The Historical District represents a highlighted attraction and manifestation of something the city is doing right. Further, residents tend to believe local government is responsive when it comes to these core services.

However, outside of these core functions, the affirmative characteristics of local government are tenuous at best. People struggle to come up with positive ways to describe city government and are wholly unfamiliar with the city's accomplishments. They are not paying attention on a day-to-day basis and usually only engage when there is a problem.

People have a much easier time spelling out the critiques of city government, which include:

- **People view city government as responsive, but to whom?** There is a very real sense of populism running through people in Snohomish. This manifests in a perceived lack of transparency and accountability regarding government dealings. People immediately—and quite strongly—associate local government with backroom, sweetheart deals, a good ol’ boy network, and a pay-to-play mentality that benefits a murky set of undefined special interests over regular citizens. In the end, this is a central factor in the lack of trust and interaction with city government.
- **A lack of aggressiveness when it comes to improving people’s lives.** While the status quo in Snohomish is pretty good and city government generally helps keep it that way, people are looking for more. To be fair, at least part—if not most—of this stems from the basic lack of knowledge they have about recent accomplishments and plans.
- **A nearly universal concern over water rates.** Residents believe their bills have increased dramatically in a short time span, and that the new PUD billing system lacks the accountability of the old system. The reality is that specific issues almost always generate more passion than broader perceptions of a government (or an elected official, for that matter)—especially an issue that hits people in the pocketbook, and especially when they are unaware of the benefits of the cost increase.

Views on growth are nuanced and inconsistent, and figure heavily into perceptions of local government. This is important because it is a) at the forefront of people’s everyday concerns, and b) an issue that defines local government—it is one of the few things that residents know the city government is responsible for. On the whole, the local city government has done a relatively good job protecting and preserving what people like about Snohomish—the small town, rural, but connected feel—and they do offer recognition of that. At the same time, residents are concerned about infrastructure and traffic, yet they want progress. Among young people in particular, there is a sense of stagnation; that Snohomish is not moving forward and other local communities offer more for young families.

Communications and Engagement

Fair or unfair, Snohomish residents view communications as a one-way street. The degree to which people believe the city government communicates with them is negligible—they feel completely in the dark about what is going on at City Hall. Even the younger cohort, which is much more present on social media (though older people also cite Facebook in particular as an effective form of communications), are entirely unaware of any local government social media presence. Further, the information that people do recall is very passive, taking the form of street banners (like advertising for Klahaya Days), as short advertisements or public notices in The Snohomish Tribune, or as mailers. Rarely is it something that strikes people as deeply relevant to their own lives.

Several important dynamics undergird this finding and reinforce the populist critique of city government:

- **The perceived lack of communication reinforces the notion that city government has something to hide.**
- **People feel like they have to work hard to get information from city government, causing them to feel as though the city is disinterested in forging a real partnership with regular residents.**
- **When people do receive communications, it feels either contrived (received right before Election Day) or empty (devoid of any real information).**

At the heart of the matter is a feeling of being left out and ignored. The one type of communication that stands out for people is heavily interactive—surveys or other communications soliciting people’s input (a survey regarding waste disposal comes up several times). This suggests an effort on the city government’s part to create a partnership with the people of Snohomish and a sense that their opinion matters, which pushes back simultaneously on both disaffection and disengagement.

Communicating with residents is one thing; moving them toward active engagement and involvement is quite another. Snohomish residents have a difficult time even conceiving of the available avenues for involvement—attending a meeting is about the only known method and that is largely confined to the older age group.

This type of engagement is a heavy lift for a city government in any circumstance and several barriers are currently exacerbating the situation in Snohomish:

- **Interaction with city government is largely transactional.** People come to the city government when they have a specific need to fulfill and those needs largely center on core services, such as paying a bill or getting a permit. This not only makes it hard to generate passion and interest; it also inhibits the establishment of a longer-term relationship.
- **Public meetings are not well-publicized, require effort to attend, and are often contentious.** Accordingly, while public meetings represent the first means of engagement that come to mind for people, they are not seen as particularly effective.
- **People are busy.** The reality is that until they have a problem, engaging with city government does not rank high on people’s list of priorities, especially younger people with families.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Filter all communications through the prism of creating a partnership with people; establish a “partnership” brand.** While this may seem obvious, it is not the message currently being received by Snohomish residents. They view government as distant and often adversarial, and while they do not feel dismissed outright, they have no real connection to City Hall. However, people want a different relationship with the government; they want to know that they are part of the team. This may be challenging to demonstrate through action alone, so telling people more directly through a branded “partnership” campaign may be impactful.
- **Focus on specific issues in order to make city government relevant to people’s daily lives.** The fact is that people are unlikely to engage with the local government if the outcome does not have a measureable impact on their own lives. The more specific and relevant the issues are—traffic and public safety are a good initial set of poster issues—the better chance people will take notice and action.
 - Consider individual issue forums, rather than long public meetings that cover a range of issues. Rather than inviting people to a monthly city council meeting, use language like “come Thursday to talk about widening Route X or Route Y.”
- **Connect with people through kids.** Issues affecting their children are always going to get people’s attention and things that benefit their kids will immediately reduce many of the barriers that keep people disengaged. Further, families are always looking for things to do on weekends. Staging family-oriented, fun community events provides city government with a vehicle for demonstrating an interest in people’s lives and deepening the connection. To the degree possible, a school-based approach and things like field trips to City Hall may be other ideas to consider.
- **Address the populist critique through aggressive transparency and accountability measures.** Snohomish residents have a deep-seated distrust of local government rooted in the notion of secrecy and backroom dealings. It is critical to push back on this critique through an aggressive campaign that refutes this image. Things like streaming government meetings, posting more records online, and creating new conflict of interest laws can help, but they also need to be advertised so people know about them.
- **Ask more aggressively and less often.** The expectation for engagement is unlikely to be more than a few times a year for most people. That premise, combined with the fact that people are not currently hearing anything about being invited to participate, suggests that a harder push less often may be a more effective tactic. Even if this limits opportunities for people, the simple fact that they are more likely to be aware that things are happening has value.
- **Experiment with some innovative and out-of-the-box ideas for grabbing people’s attention.** Given the lack of recall of current communications, there are really no bad ideas here. Canvassing people at home provides a more impactful touch than mail or flyers and also allows

for a two-way conversation that allows people to express their opinions. Online town halls are an option. Social pressure is an emerging fad in communications that could prove quite valuable here—if people think they are the only one not getting involved with city government, they may take action to avoid social embarrassment.

- **Trumpet accomplishments more aggressively.** Part of the challenge for the Snohomish government is the lack of awareness about what it does, which leads people to conclude that it may not be doing much at all. Communications should feature important accomplishments, especially as they relate to issues that impact people every day.
- **Increase social media presence and drive people there.** Social media represents a major source of information for people, but Snohomish residents have no awareness of the city's social media accounts. Facebook and Twitter are the most notable mediums—Facebook for older people in particular—but other social media enhancement tools may help achieve this goal. Speaking with a firm specializing in this type of communications and targeting may prove useful.

CONCLUSION

The City of Snohomish government faces challenges in the pursuit of a more active, engaged constituency, but they are not insurmountable. Opportunity exists to establish the type of partnership with local residents that results in a deeper connection. Results will not come overnight, but with a strong commitment of resources and some innovative thinking, real progress can be made.