

# The Engagement Engine: Fueling Public Trust Through Civic Education

**Presented by :**

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City of Palm Desert

# About Me & PD

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Introduction and overview of our community.

# Civic Education

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Who's this for, anyway?

# What You Can Do

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There are some big options for you to consider!

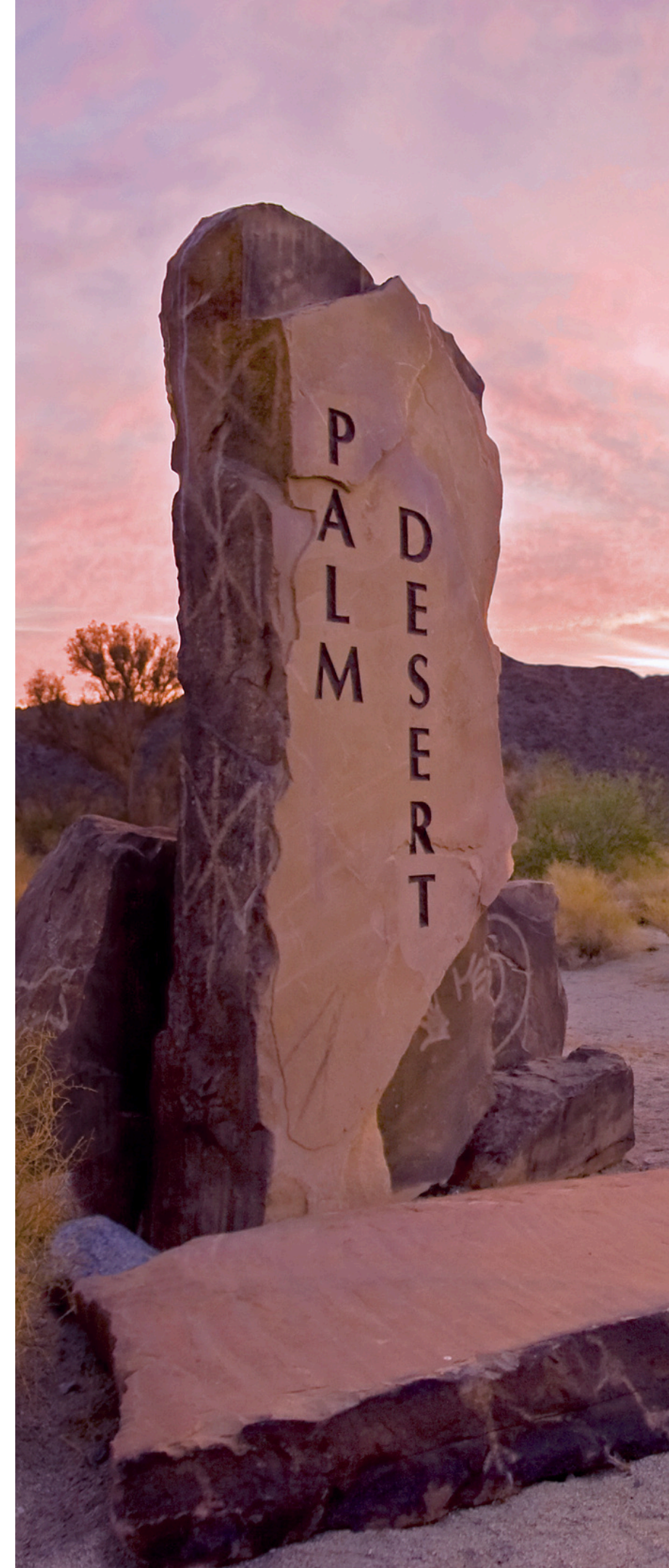
# The Civic Academy

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What is that and how can we create one?

# Our Results

Takeaways from increased Civic Education.



# About Me & PD

Introduction and Overview of Our Community



# Ryland Penta

## **My Motivation & Passion**

I'm passionate about fostering meaningful connections between local government and the community, driven by a commitment to transparency, collaboration, and creating civic experiences that make residents feel heard and engaged.

## **My Role at the City of Palm Desert**

I lead civic engagement, outreach, and communication efforts for the City of Palm Desert, ensuring residents stay informed, involved, and connected to city projects and initiatives.



# Palm Desert Snapshot

- Permanent Residents: 53,087
- Seasonal Residents: 32,000
- Median Resident Age: 55.1
- Area: 26.96 Square Miles (69.44 km<sup>2</sup>)
- Housing Units: 35,755
- Housing Units Planned: 10,000
- Home Ownership: 64.6%
- Employment within City Boundary: 40,156
- Average Sunshine: 350 Days Per Year

- Palm Desert has a population of approximately 53,000 in the Coachella Valley. The median age is around 55, reflecting a mix of retirees, working professionals, and young families.
- Palm Desert is a Charter City and contracts out police and fire service to Riverside County.



# Why Civic Education Matters for PIOs

## **Increasing Transparency in Our Organizations**

Civic education empowers the public with a clear understanding of government processes, fostering trust by making decision-making more accessible and understandable.

## **Facilitate Knowledge on What We Do & Why**

A well-informed public is more likely to support and collaborate with government initiatives when they understand the purpose, constraints, and impact of public sector work.

## **Encourage Ongoing Civic Engagement**

Educating residents about how they can participate in government ensures engagement isn't just reactive but an ongoing, informed dialogue between the community and local agencies.

## **Pollinate Our Norms, Mission, and Goals**

By embedding civic education into outreach efforts, PIOs help cultivate a shared understanding of their organization's values, leading to a more aligned and engaged community.



# Civic Education

Who's This For, Anyway?



Palm Desert Civic Academy  
Tours the Corporate Yard

# What Is Civic Education?

## Let's Define Civic Education

“Civic education’ means all the processes that affect people’s beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions as members or prospective members of communities.”

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

## The Importance of Civic Education

*“Civic education is an essential part of democracy, as it teaches people the value of taking an active role in the civic process. It encourages citizens to become actively engaged with their local community and participate in activities that promote the betterment of society.”*

- Sandra Day O’Connor Institute



**Palm Desert Civic Academy  
Learns About Public Art**

# Who Benefits from Civic Education?

## **The Public; Residents, Business Owners, Students, and Visitors**

Civic education enhances community understanding of local government, fostering a sense of place and belonging. When residents, businesses, and visitors understand decision-making, they can collaborate and advocate more effectively. This shared knowledge strengthens connections, making the community more engaged and resilient.

## **The Organization; Projects, Programs, Staff, and Elected Officials**

An informed public provides valuable feedback, shaping projects while reducing misinformation. It enhances the organization's reputation, streamlines government processes, and frees up staff time. For elected officials, civic education offers a structured way to address public inquiries, ensuring engagement is focused on solutions.



**Palm Desert High School Students  
Learn About Building & Safety**

# The Knowledge Gap

What the public typically doesn't know about local government



## **The Role of Each Agency in the Local Community**

Many residents are unaware of which agency handles specific services, leading to confusion about where to turn for assistance. Clarifying these roles helps the public navigate local government efficiently and engage with the right departments.



## **The Relationship With Higher Levels of Government.**

People often assume local governments have more authority than they do, not realizing how state and federal policies influence local decisions. Educating the public on these relationships helps set realistic expectations and encourages advocacy at the right levels.

# Barriers to Engagement

## **Lack of Time & Awareness**

Many residents are busy and unaware of opportunities to engage with local government.

- **Solution:** Simplify participation by offering quick, accessible ways to get involved, such as online surveys, social media Q&As, and brief, engaging public meetings.

## **Distrust & Perception of Ineffectiveness**

Some people feel their input won't make a difference or distrust government processes.

- **Solution:** Build trust through transparency—clearly show how public feedback influences decisions, provide regular updates, and create meaningful two-way communication.



# What You Can Do

There Are Some Big Options for You to Consider!



Coffee with the Mayor at  
College of the Desert

# Beyond Press Releases & Social Media



## **Building Meaningful Dialogue**

One-way communication informs, but true engagement requires conversation. Creating opportunities for residents to ask questions, share concerns, and participate in decision-making builds trust and strengthens community relationships.

## **Reaching Underserved Audiences**

Not everyone follows social media or reads press releases, leaving gaps in public awareness. Deeper engagement strategies, such as community meetings, pop-up events, and direct outreach, ensure a broader and more inclusive exchange of information.

## **Creating Lasting Civic Awareness**

Press releases and social media posts provide momentary updates, but deeper engagement fosters long-term civic understanding. When people actively participate in discussions and decision-making, they become more invested in their community and its future.



Civic Academy Participants Learn About Marketing & Tourism

# Building a Culture of Learning

**Internally:** Creating a culture of learning within your organization by equipping staff with the confidence and skills to engage the community by providing training on public speaking, active listening, and clear communication.

**Externally:** Fostering civic education involves offering accessible programs empowering residents to better understand local government and take an active role in shaping their city.

# Storytelling in Civic Education

## **Leveraging Technology**

Digital tools like videos, podcasts, and interactive websites make civic education more accessible and engaging. Using technology to tell stories helps break down complex topics, reaching people where they are and making government processes more relatable.

## **Gamification & Interactive Elements**

Turning civic education into an interactive experience, such as quizzes, simulations, or challenges, encourages participation and retention. By making learning fun and hands-on, residents are more likely to engage with local government and understand its impact on their daily lives.



*Welcome to Engage*  
PALM DESERT



**Palm Desert High School Students  
Recognized By City Council**

# Collaborating with Schools & Universities

Collaborating with schools and universities ensures that young people understand the role of local government, fosters civic responsibility, and prepares them to be informed community members and future leaders.

- Introduces students to how local government functions and impacts their daily lives.
- Encourages civic responsibility and participation from an early age.
- Connects students with potential career paths in public service.
- Provides local agencies with fresh perspectives and input on projects that will affect future generations.

# The Civic Academy

What Is That and How Can We Create One?



Civic Academy Cohort #1

# What Is a Civic Academy?

A Civic Academy is a multi-session program that educates residents about local government services, programs, and projects while fostering relationships between the community and city staff.

- Features multiple sessions, each with 3-4 presentations from different city departments.
- Provides residents with direct access to staff to ask questions and gain a deeper understanding of city operations.
- Helps clarify common concerns and misconceptions about how local government functions.
- Encourages ongoing civic engagement by equipping participants with knowledge and resources.
- Strengthens community connections by creating a space for dialogue between residents and city leaders.

*City of Palm Desert*  
**CIVIC ACADEMY**

**EXPERIENCE PALM DESERT  
FROM ART TO ZONING**

## How it Works

- Monday evenings from 5:00 to 7:30 p.m.
- Held at five various City-owned facilities
  - City Hall
  - Desert Willow Golf Resort
  - Entrepreneurial Resource Center
  - Civic Center Park
  - Corporate Yard Facility
- Dinner provided at 5:00 p.m. and program from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.
- Different local restaurant each week.
- Elected officials are discouraged from attending sessions, but Council provides certificate after each program.

## Topics Covered

- Session 1
  - Council & appointed bodies, Homelessness, Emergency Services
- Session 2
  - Economic Development, City Budget, Tourism & Marketing, Library
- Session 3
  - Housing, Planning, Short-Term Rentals, and Code Compliance
- Session 4
  - Parks & Recreation, Events, Public Art, Environmental Programs
- Session 5
  - Public Works, Public Safety

## Program Management

- Facilitated by one staff person, with support from two others.
- Application period is three months, and close three weeks before program start.
- Coordinate speakers two months before program start
- Applications are scored by panel of staff using a rubric that set by Civic Engagement Committee.
- Email all applicants of their application status. Remind successful applicants of program guidelines. Send a survey after each session.

# The Palm Desert Model

# Structuring Your Own Civic Academy

1

## **Set Program Goals, Objective, & Get Buy In**

Outline measurable goals, and secure support from key stakeholders to ensure alignment and commitment throughout the process.

2

## **Consider a Trial Group**

Start with a smaller, pilot group to test the program's effectiveness, gather feedback, and make adjustments before launching to a wider audience.

3

## **Consult Counterparts Doing Other Programs**

Reach out to other cities or organizations with similar programs to gain insights on best practices, challenges, and successful strategies.

4

## **Plan Your Curriculum With Time for Marketing**

Develop a comprehensive curriculum while allowing ample time for promoting the program, ensuring you engage the right participants and generate interest.



Coffee with the Mayor

# Recruiting Participants

- **Marketing the Program's Purpose** – Clearly communicate the Civic Academy's goals and value to potential participants, emphasizing how it will help them understand local government and engage with city services.
- **Reaching Groups Outside the Normal Orbit of City Hall** – Tap into networks and organizations that extend beyond the typical reach of City Hall, such as local schools, community groups, and businesses. Use existing programs and outreach tools to connect with diverse groups.
- **Leverage Word of Mouth** – Word of mouth is often the most powerful recruitment tool. Start by engaging a pilot group of participants who are already connected to City Hall; their experiences can help generate buzz and encourage others to join the program.

# Overcoming Common Challenges

## Funding

Leveraging cost-effective resources, seeking sponsorships, and utilizing existing city budget allocations can ensure long-term sustainability. The Palm Desert Civic Academy typically costs around **\$5,000** for a five-session program, covering expenses like food, room rental (if needed), and materials for participants.

## Internal Resistance

To overcome internal resistance, it's essential to communicate the program's value clearly, showing how it aligns with organizational goals and enhances the city's reputation. By framing it as a strategic investment in community engagement and public trust, staff will better understand its long-term benefits.



Palm Desert City-Wide HOA  
Community Meeting

# Our Results

Takeaways from Increased Civic Education



## **Strengthening the Public Narrative**

Educated residents develop a deeper understanding of local government, which helps dispel misconceptions and fosters trust.

This improved transparency strengthens the public narrative, encouraging positive dialogue between the community and city leaders.

This trust and passion for our city is a natural pollinator in our communities and has created a network of engaged and supportive people.

***The Civic Academy was an great experience! Not only did I gain a deeper understanding of how our city operates, but I also had the incredible opportunity to connect with dedicated city staff and engaged residents from all across the community. The interactive discussions, especially when participants brought insightful questions, made each session even more meaningful.***

***- Emily Vogt, Cohort #1***

## **More Civic Participation**

When residents are more informed, they are more likely to engage in civic activities, such as applying for city committees and commissions.

Since the pandemic, vacancies in these roles increased in Palm Desert, but after four Civic Academy programs, 18 participants have gone on to apply for appointed bodies.

Many Civic Academy alumni return for project meetings and events like Coffee with the Mayor.

# What Happens When Residents Are More Informed?

# Lessons for PIOs



Civic Academy Cohort #2

## **Public Attention is Our Most Valuable Resource**

Capturing and holding the public's attention requires more than just press releases and social media posts. The Civic Academy offers a unique opportunity to engage residents in a meaningful, long-lasting way, building a foundation for ongoing participation and civic pride.

## **Fostering Collaboration Across Departments**

The Civic Academy is a collaborative effort that brings together staff from all departments, encouraging cross-functional teamwork. This program not only informs the public but also promotes a positive and cooperative culture within the organization.

# A Call to Action

Final Thoughts and Questions



# Final Thoughts

## **Civic Education Requires Thoughtful Investment**

Civic education isn't an afterthought; it's a strategic investment in building a more informed, engaged, and empowered community that benefits both the residents and the city.

## **Return on Investment Isn't Always Quantifiable**

The impact of civic education can't always be measured in dollars and cents, but it's reflected in the long-term trust, participation, and social capital that strengthen the fabric of our community.

## **Success Isn't Linear**

Progress in civic education is often incremental, and real change takes time, but every step forward is a victory that creates momentum for deeper community engagement.

## **Trust in Government is Everything**

The foundation of a thriving democracy rests on trust, and through ongoing civic education, we can build transparency and accountability, ensuring the public believes in the integrity and effectiveness of their local government.





# Action Steps

## **Determine Internally if Civic Education is a Priority**

Before launching any program, ensure your organization recognizes civic education as a core value—without internal buy-in, even the best ideas will fall short.

## **Identify What Type of Program is Best**

Whether it's a Civic Academy, workshops, or digital campaigns, choose the program that best aligns with your community's needs and your organization's capacity.

## **Test Your Program, Pivot if Needed**

Start small and be ready to adjust; testing your program with a pilot group allows you to learn, adapt, and refine before scaling to a wider audience.

## **Involve Staff From Across Your Organization**

Collaboration is key; involving staff from all departments ensures the program is comprehensive, diverse, and reflects the full scope of city services and programs.

# Thank You!

**Ryland Penta**

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City of Palm Desert

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