

## Showing Up by Connie O'Connor

It's a common movie plot: a community of annoying strangers with seemingly nothing in common find themselves thrown together. As they face challenges, they show up for one another, bringing their unique perspectives and talents. Trust, appreciation, and friendship grow. They find belonging and shared purpose where once was anonymity and isolation. The credits roll and viewers sigh, wishing they could find such connection and meaning.

Many Americans feel socially isolated, but nature lovers might feel especially alone while wondering how to make their communities more pleasant, healthy, and life-affirming. There are so many barriers. We might want to walk or bike to work, but there are no sidewalks or bike lanes. We want less development and more greenspace but have no right to tell others what to do with their land. We want downward-facing lights to protect dark skies, native plants along roadsides, or an aggregated price for green-sourced electricity. What can we do? One way forward is through civic engagement. The trustees, commissioners, mayors, administrators, planners, and/or other decision makers in your community are real people doing their best and giving their time for the common good, or at least we hope they are. It's hard to trust them if we don't know them. It would be helpful to know who they are, what matters to them, and which issues keep them up at night.

In the past, people lived in small towns where public officials and decision makers were neighbors, relatives, friends or business owners. But nowadays it takes special effort, with our suburban commuting lifestyle, to understand what happens behind the scenes in our communities. One administrator worries about funding road repairs; one mayor seeks compromise as citizens argue over different uses for a piece of public land. In many cases, constituents only appear at meetings when they want something. Can regular citizens and their public decision makers find better ways to connect?

It's been said that decisions are made by those who show up. Your public officials have shown up, and you can too. There are many ways to do so:

1. Explore the website for your township, city, or village to find out when and where public meetings are held. If available, sign up for your municipal newsletter.
2. Attend public meetings and *listen, listen, listen*. *Seek first to understand* before promoting your own agenda.
3. Prepare yourself. Know the facts beyond your personal opinions and assumptions. Talk to local government and non-profit organizations and to other community members; research how other communities have successfully addressed your concerns.

4. Decide which public officials you're most comfortable talking to and introduce yourself. Arrange to meet for coffee, seek common ground and to learn how you might be of service to the community in terms of the issues you care about.
5. Ask about volunteer positions for citizens on committees or commissions for parks, zoning, housing, etc. and learn the qualifications and process to join.
6. VOTE. Learn which local and state public officials support conservation and how you can support them. If nobody seems interested in conservation, consider running for office yourself or supporting someone in doing so.
7. Help ensure a safe and participatory political environment by volunteering as a poll observer or assistant. Regardless of party, showing up will earn respect and shows that you care.
8. Encourage voter engagement by becoming a precinct captain (liaison between voters and officials) for your political party. Help voters be better informed by explaining the issues that your party's candidates care about.

As you start to reliably and respectfully show up and offer help, you'll meet new people and come to be known as someone who cares and can be trusted. People, even those in public office, are more likely to be influenced by those they know and trust. As you discover the complexity of local issues and the various perspectives needed to address them, you may start to question the common narrative of polarization and mistrust. Most folks are doing the best they can – often with different priorities and life experiences.

While helping make your community an economically and environmentally healthy place to live, play, and work, you might also feel a sense of belonging, connection, and purpose that some people only find in movies. Nature and people will thrive. And as you help local decision makers become less polarized and more concerned about the environment, the impact may ripple out to state and eventually national decision makers.

All because...you showed up!