

## **Example Format for Community Dialogue**

### **Topic: What is Town Meeting Day?**

Community conversations are a wonderful opportunity to identify priorities, generate new ideas, build stronger civic relationships, and discuss pros and cons of different policies. However, not all discussions in the public sphere invite those sorts of engagements!

There are many talented moderators and facilitators around Vermont, and we are excited to learn of ways that people design constructive conversations. For those looking for a place to start brainstorming, we describe below the format we are using in these discussions at Middlebury College.

#### **Build a Foundation**

1. *Provide an article, podcast, or video for participants to review.* Everyone will come in with different backgrounds and experiences. That is wonderful, and it can also help to have a shared starting point. At Middlebury, we are starting with short introductory talks (~20 minutes), and will post these videos to the Conflict Transformation [video library](#). These could be provided in advance, or you can share them as a starting point for the event.
2. *Small Group Introductions:* if you have more than 6-8 participants, breaking up into smaller groups will offer more opportunities for dialogue. Have people introduce themselves with a light question – [a suggested list is here](#).
3. *Discuss Guidelines for Engagement:* you might be explicit in saying that existing models in the public sphere don't always model constructive conflict. Suggest some guidelines and then ask participants to add their own. Some ideas: (1) take turns, (2) don't interrupt, (3) assume goodwill, (4) listen to understand, not to persuade or respond.

#### **Provide Open Discussion Questions**

A good question can transform dialogue, promoting curiosity and complexity and preventing personal attacks or debate. Below, we provide some questions we will use, and would love to hear other examples! These could be provided to small groups one at a time or all at once.

1. What is one thing that surprised you in Bert Johnson's talk? What is one thing you still have a question about?
2. Have you been to a government meeting before (development review board, city council, school board, legislature)? What did you expect going in, and how did it meet or not meet those expectations?
3. What do you think is the most important issue for local government to be facing right now?
4. How does this story of Vermont Town Meeting Day compare with how you understand the local government where you live?
5. Beyond voting, what do you think are the most essential responsibilities of citizens in a democracy?

#### **Reconvene as a Group**

Invite participants to share any new insights, identify information that they still need, or suggest steps for engaging the community or civic leaders.