

Designing discussions to encourage community action

CIVIC (Community Voices, Informed Choices), a program of the Florida Cooperative Extension Service led by both Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) and University of Florida (UF) develops and conducts deliberative discussions in local communities throughout Florida. Our relationship with municipal governments enables Extension agents to be a bridge between the public and the staff, collecting and synthesizing public opinion, and even targeting critical voices that may not often be heard. This enables us to report that actions were taken to help solve the problem if community government was already primed to work on the problem. Due to COVID-19, most in-person gatherings were cancelled in 2020 and 2021; our deliberative discussions and focus groups were conducted via Zoom, which caused people to be less likely to participate or for the groups to be smaller in size and more homogeneous. CIVIC was still able to help move participants toward community action by developing and following specific guidelines to engage communities in the discussion. These guidelines include understanding that moving toward community action (1) begins before the deliberative discussion, (2) requires specific strategies during the deliberative discussion, and (3) is a function of the partners, issues, and the opportunities. This presentation will describe in more detail these guidelines and what CIVIC has learned from the discussions over the past 2 years. The presentation will also explore next steps for CIVIC, challenges we still see, and skills we'd like to continue to build.



Holly Abeels

Holly Abeels is a Florida Sea Grant Extension Agent with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Brevard County. As an extension agent, she brings science-based information to the community in areas of natural resources, sustainability, climate change, and water quality and conservation. Her Extension programs include teaching the Florida Master Naturalist Program, working with communities to address climate change and sea level rise, and working with volunteers on projects like the Florida Horseshoe Crab Watch.

Martha Monroe

Martha Monroe is a professor and Extension specialist in environmental education in the School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences at the University of Florida in Gainesville, FL. Her work in the human dimensions of natural resources (wildfire, water quality, climate change), emphasizes public perceptions, adaptive collaborative management, citizen engagement, and behavior change. Her work with CIVIC emphasizes building community capacity to enhance governance.