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Three-Part Analysis of Public Trust

A Systems Framework for Strengthening Civic Engagement and Public Accountability

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Why Public Trust Erodes

Three systemic barriers to effective civic engagement

- Information Vacuums
  - Incomplete information leads to speculation and competing narratives.
- Incomplete Feedback Loops
  - Decision-makers lose visibility into community perspectives.
- Lack of Psychological Safety for Dissent
  - Residents disengage when they feel ignored, dismissed, or labeled.

Key Takeaway: These barriers reinforce one another, creating a cycle of declining public trust.

**** Research and findings are specific to Lakewood, Colorado. Applicability to other municipalities requires additional evaluation.

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What the Case Studies Reveal

Recurring Patterns in Municipal Decision-Making

- Budget Transparency During Financial Constraints - Information Vacuum
  - Limited visibility into financial challenges, budget decisions, and trade-offs can create confusion and undermine public confidence.
- Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Codes - Incomplete Feedback Loops
  - Public participation does not always demonstrate how community concerns influenced policy decisions.
- Zoning Ordinance Reintroduction - Lack of Psychological Safety for Dissent
  - Repeating engagement processes after significant public opposition can reinforce perceptions that dissent is not valued.

Key Takeaway: Providing opportunities for public input is not the same as demonstrating public accountability.

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From Public Engagement to Public Accountability

Proposed Solution: Public Engagement Accountability Standard

- Document - Create a Transparent Decision Record
  - Publish dissenting perspectives, alternatives considered, and the rationale for decisions.
- Demonstrate - Close the Feedback Loop
  - Show how public input influenced decisions and explain why recommendations were accepted or rejected.
- Evaluate - Measure and Improve Engagement
  - Assess participation, engagement effectiveness, and lessons learned to improve future processes.
- Implementation Opportunity
  - Establish a consistent, repeatable accountability standard for significant municipal decisions.

Key Takeaway: Institutionalize the process. Do not leave transparency to chance**.**

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From Framework to Implementation

Individual Action Plan: Next Steps

- Engage Municipal Leadership
  - Present the framework and discuss its feasibility and potential application.
- Explore Opportunities for Implementation
  - Explore incorporating the Public Engagement Accountability Standard into existing municipal processes.
- Establish Measures of Success
  - Identify ways to evaluate transparency, public feedback, and engagement effectiveness.

Key Takeaway: Institutional change begins when effective practices become consistent, measurable, and repeatable.

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