

Community Engagement Framework

Saline County, Kansas

A practical guide for clear communication, meaningful public input, and
accountable follow-through.



Executive Summary

Public trust is essential to good county government. Saline County will work to communicate clearly, listen early, and explain how public input is used.

This framework helps county departments move from responding only when concerns arise to sharing information and seeking input before major decisions are made. It sets common expectations for how the county will communicate, ask for feedback, report what it heard, and explain next steps.

The goal is not for everyone to agree with every county decision. The goal is for residents to understand the issue, know how to participate, and trust that county leaders considered public input before making decisions.

Not every issue needs the same level of public involvement. Routine updates may only need clear information. Major decisions about the budget, roads, facilities, services, safety, or county policy may require more opportunities for public input.

1. Purpose and Strategic Intent

The Community Engagement Initiative will help Saline County communicate and listen earlier, more clearly, and more consistently. County information should be easy to find, easy to understand, and available in ways that work for people across the county.

By engaging the public early, Saline County can:

- Build trust before problems grow.
- Reduce confusion and misinformation.
- Help residents understand county services, responsibilities, and limits.
- Hear concerns and ideas before major decisions are made.
- Improve county services, policies, projects, and spending decisions.
- Strengthen relationships with cities, schools, businesses, nonprofits, and residents.

2. Vision, Mission, and Guiding Principles

Vision

A county government that is trusted, easy to reach, and responsive to the people it serves.

Mission

To give residents clear information and meaningful chances to share ideas about county decisions that affect their lives.

Our Commitment

When Saline County asks for public input, we will explain:

- What decision is being considered.
- Why public input is needed.
- What parts of the decision can change.

- What limits apply.
- Who will make the final decision.
- When we will report back.

Guiding Principles

Principle	What it means
Be clear	Explain the issue, the options, and what can and cannot change.
Listen early	Ask for input before decisions are made whenever possible.
Make it easy to participate	Use plain language, accessible locations, online options, and different meeting times.
Reach the whole county	Include rural areas, smaller towns, working families, seniors, young people, businesses, and groups that may be left out.
Report back	Tell the public what we heard, what changed, and what could not change.
Be consistent	Use common county tools, templates, and communication standards.
Be respectful	Support civil conversations and give people more than one way to ask questions or share concerns.
Match the effort to the decision	Use more outreach for decisions with greater public impact.

3. Strategic Goals

Goal 1: Build public trust through clear communication. Share timely information about county decisions and explain how public input was considered.

Goal 2: Reach people across Saline County. Use online and in-person options to reach rural residents, smaller towns, working families, seniors, young people, businesses, nonprofits, and others who may not usually participate.

Goal 3: Improve county decisions. Gather useful input early on budget, policy, roads, facilities, public safety, and service decisions.

Goal 4: Create consistent county practices. Use shared templates, training, calendars, and roles so departments can plan public input effectively.

Goal 5: Learn and improve. Track participation, quality of input, and follow-through, then improve the process each year.

Participation in smaller towns should be planned, not left to chance. The county should rotate public-input opportunities throughout Saline County and work with local officials, libraries, schools, senior centers, churches, employers, and community groups.

4. Choosing the Right Level of Public Input

Not every county issue needs the same type of public involvement. Saline County will match its communication and public-input efforts to the size of the decision, who is affected, legal requirements, and whether public feedback can still shape the outcome.

The County Commission and other elected officials keep their legal authority to make decisions. Public input helps inform those decisions. It does not transfer decision-making authority unless state law allows it.

Internal Decision Questions

Before starting a major communication or public-input effort, county staff should ask:

1. Who will be affected? Will this affect residents, taxpayers, businesses, service users, partner agencies, or county employees?
2. What rules or legal limits apply? Does the issue involve a required hearing, privacy concerns, a contract, procurement rules, personnel matters, public safety, or another legal restriction?
3. Is the decision still open? If public input can shape the outcome, the county should ask for feedback. If the decision has already been made, the county should clearly explain the decision and why it was made.
4. How much public interest is likely? Could the issue create questions, concern, confusion, or misinformation?
5. Who needs to be included? Consider rural residents, smaller towns, people who use the service, businesses, partner governments, and people who may not normally attend public meetings.
6. How will we report back? Decide in advance how feedback will be collected, reviewed, shared with decision-makers, and reported to the public.

Public-Facing Decision Guide

The county should publish a simple guide called “How Saline County Decides When and How to Engage the Public.” It should explain when the county shares information, when it asks for input, what information may be limited by law, how feedback reaches decision-makers, and where residents can participate.

Level	What it means	Our promise	Examples
Inform	Share timely, clear information.	We will keep you informed.	Road work, service updates, budget summaries
Consult	Ask for feedback on options.	We will listen and consider your input.	Fee changes, draft policies, facility plans
Involve	Work with the public as options are developed.	We will consider concerns as we develop choices.	Strategic plans, service improvements
Collaborate	Work with residents and partners to build recommendations.	We will work together on possible solutions.	Long-range plans, major projects
Empower, when allowed by law	Let the public make a defined decision.	We will carry out the decision within the stated limits.	Advisory votes, pilot projects, community-led recommendations

5. People and Partners We Need to Reach

Saline County should identify who is affected by each issue and who may be missing from the conversation. The county should consider the level of impact, barriers to participation, and the best way to reach each group.

- Residents across Saline County, including rural residents and people in smaller towns.
- Businesses, employers, and economic-development partners.
- Cities, townships, schools, libraries, and other government partners.
- Nonprofits, faith communities, neighborhood groups, and service organizations.
- County employees and departments that provide or support county services.
- People who use a specific service or may face barriers to participating.

6. Priority Areas for County Engagement

Public input should be connected to real county decisions. Priority areas may include the annual budget, capital planning, roads and infrastructure, public safety, public health, facilities, economic development, county services, and major policy changes.

Many residents interact with county government only when something goes wrong. The county should create regular, low-barrier opportunities to explain its work and hear from the public before conflict or frustration grows.

7. Ways to Communicate and Gather Input

The county should use more than one method when an issue affects different parts of the community. The best method depends on the decision, the audience, and the type of input needed.

Purpose	Methods	Best use
Share broad information	Website updates, social media, newsletters, media briefings, mailers	Keeping large audiences informed
Gather broad feedback	Surveys, comment forms, polls, open houses, interactive maps	Identifying themes and concerns
Discuss tradeoffs	Workshops, town halls, listening sessions, focus groups, roundtables	Exploring options and tradeoffs
Reach specific groups	Pop-up events, partner-led meetings, outreach through schools, churches, employers, community groups, and smaller-town locations	Reaching people who may not attend standard meetings
Build ongoing relationships	Advisory groups, resident panels, standing stakeholder groups	Long-term issues and continuing input

Engagement Ideas to Pilot

- **County update newsletter:** A brief monthly or twice-monthly update on county work, upcoming decisions, department spotlights, project updates, public health and safety information, and ways to participate. Include a “You Asked, We Answered” feature when possible.
- **Community input webpage:** A central webpage for current surveys, project information, FAQs, comment forms, timelines, meeting notices, and “What We Heard” reports. Start with a basic webpage and add tools only as needed.
- **Community pulse polls:** Short surveys to identify local priorities, communication preferences, service awareness, and concerns. Unless a survey is designed to be statistically representative, describe it as a way to identify themes—not as a vote.

- **County Conversations:** After-hours question-and-answer sessions held monthly or quarterly in rotating locations. County staff and, when appropriate, Commissioners can discuss current projects and answer questions.
- **Smaller-town listening sessions:** Meet in familiar places such as libraries, schools, senior centers, city halls, fire stations, community centers, and local events.
- **Interactive budgeting:** Provide the public with an interactive budgeting tool that provides the opportunity to see how the budget is developed, where it stands, and what impacts changes make.
- **County Commission Roadshow:** Each year the BOCC will host one regular commission meeting in each district to allow more attendance from the community members in that district.
- **Community service or volunteer day:** A carefully planned partnership event with nonprofits, cities, or community groups that helps build relationships while protecting essential county services.
- **Youth Commission simulation:** Interested school districts can work with County Administration to coordinate a mock County Commission with student's role playing in the commission meeting.
- **Department engagement liaisons:** Each department identifies a staff contact to coordinate public updates, FAQs, engagement opportunities, and feedback summaries with the county communications or engagement lead.
- **Speaking tour:** Commission, administration, or engagement liaisons provide regular in-person updates to different civic group and social groups in the community such as Lions Club, AMBUCS, Rotary, Granny Brigade, etc.
- **Communication and branding guide:** A countywide guide for plain language, accessibility, county identity, templates, official information standards, and social media practices.

8. Engagement Planning Standards

For each major public-input effort, staff should identify the decision being considered, what can and cannot change, who needs to be reached, the timeline, outreach methods, accessibility needs, how input will be recorded, and how the county will report back.

Engagement Snapshot

Each major engagement opportunity should begin with a plain-language Engagement Snapshot. It should be posted online and used in meeting materials.

Question	Public explanation
What is this about?	A short description of the issue, project, or decision.
Why are we asking for input?	What the county wants to learn from the public.
What can input influence?	Options, priorities, timing, concerns, service design, or other stated areas.
What cannot be changed?	Legal, budget, safety, personnel, contract, operational, or state and federal limits.
Who decides?	The County Commission, a department, an elected official, a partner agency, or another decision-maker.
How will input be used?	A summary report, staff recommendation, project design, policy update, or public information.
When will we report back?	An expected date or timeframe for the next update.

9. Fair Access and Participation Standards

Major public-input efforts should include, when practical:

- Plain-language materials.
- Mobile-friendly and non-digital participation options.
- Online and in-person opportunities.
- Meeting times that work for different schedules.
- ADA-accessible locations and materials.
- Interpretation or translation when needed.
- Outreach through trusted community partners.
- Meetings in locations across the county, not only at the City-County Building.

For smaller towns and groups that may be left out, the county should not rely only on formal public notices, courthouse meetings, or social media. Staff should bring information and opportunities for input into familiar community settings.

10. Governance and Roles

Community engagement must be part of how the county operates, not only a communications project. Departments should view public input as a practical tool for explaining their work, improving services, anticipating concerns, and reducing last-minute conflict.

Role	Primary responsibility
County Commission	Sets strategic direction, establishes expectations for major issues, and receives regular reports.
County Administrator	Sponsors the framework, aligns departments, and connects engagement to strategy, budget, and operations.
Communications or Community Engagement Lead	Develops standards, templates, communication protocols, branding guidance, shared calendars, and public-facing channels.
Departments	Identify decisions that need public communication or input, use county standards, and document results and follow-up.
Department heads and project leads	Own project-level plans and make sure input is considered in staff recommendations.
Advisory boards and task forces	Provide structured input from residents and partners when appropriate.
Department engagement liaisons	Coordinate upcoming projects, FAQs, public updates, engagement opportunities, and feedback summaries with the county lead.

The county should begin with simple templates and shared support. Pilot the approach with a few departments and projects before expanding it countywide.

11. Reporting Back to the Public

Trust grows when people can see what happened after they shared their views. Saline County will not ask for public input without a plan for reviewing it, sharing it with decision-makers, and reporting back to the public.

The county cannot promise that every comment will lead to a change. We can promise that we will review the input, summarize common themes, share that information with decision-makers, and explain what happens next.

For major public-input efforts, Saline County will share:

- The issue or decision being considered.
- What feedback we asked for.
- How people could participate.
- The main ideas, questions, and concerns we heard.
- What the county plans to do next.
- What changed because of public input, when applicable.
- What could not change and why.

“What We Heard” Report

A brief public report should include:

- Purpose of the engagement effort.
- How input was collected.
- Number and type of participants, when available.
- Main themes and common questions.
- County response or staff analysis.
- What can be acted on and what cannot.
- Next steps and the expected decision timeline.

12. Performance Measures

Saline County should measure whether public engagement is reaching people, producing useful input, and improving county decisions. Measures should be simple enough to track and useful enough to guide improvement.

- Number and type of engagement activities.
- Number of participants and geographic coverage.
- Participation by affected groups, when appropriate and practical to track.
- Use of online, in-person, and partner-based outreach methods.
- Number of “What We Heard” reports published.
- Time between public input and county report-back.
- Staff use of engagement templates and training.
- Examples of changes made or decisions clarified because of public input.

13. Implementation Roadmap

Phase 1: Foundation | 0–6 months

- Adopt the vision, principles, and goals.
- Inventory current communication and public-input practices.

- Create templates, communication standards, and planning tools.
- Finalize the internal decision questions and public-facing guide.
- Launch a basic community input webpage.
- Identify department engagement liaisons.

Phase 2: Pilot and Standardize | 6–12 months

- Pilot the framework on two to four high-interest county initiatives.
- Launch a regular county update newsletter.
- Pilot County Conversations or after-hours question-and-answer sessions.
- Conduct smaller-town listening sessions or pulse polls.
- Train department leaders and liaisons.
- Publish “What We Heard” reports for major pilot efforts.

Phase 3: Make It Part of Regular County Work | 12–24 months

- Build engagement planning into budget, capital, and policy workflows.
- Publish an annual engagement report.
- Expand outreach partnerships.
- Evaluate whether the community input webpage needs additional tools.
- Update the decision guide, templates, and standards based on results.

14. Risks and How We Will Address Them

Public input works best when people understand the purpose of the process and see that their time matters. Each engagement effort should explain whether the county is sharing information, asking for feedback, gathering ideas, testing options, meeting a legal requirement, or working with partners on a solution.

Risk	Likely issue	County response
Low participation	Few residents participate.	Use targeted outreach, trusted partners, rotating locations, and more than one participation method.
Input does not reflect the whole county	The same voices dominate.	Identify gaps and recruit intentionally, especially in smaller towns and affected groups.
Engagement fatigue	People are asked repeatedly but do not see results.	Focus on important issues and report back clearly.
Misinformation	People are confused about a proposal.	Use plain-language fact sheets, FAQs, and proactive updates.
Inconsistent staff practices	Departments use different approaches and quality varies.	Provide templates, training, shared support, communication standards, and liaisons.
Unrealistic expectations	People assume public input decides every issue.	Explain decision authority, limits, and what can and cannot change.
Conflict at meetings	Meetings become adversarial.	Use clear ground rules, trained facilitation, familiar locations, and other ways to provide input.
Online access barriers	Some residents cannot or do not want to participate online.	Offer a non-digital option for major public-input efforts.

Input arrives too late	Feedback is requested after staff recommendations are nearly complete.	Set public-input timelines early in the project.
Feedback is collected but not used	Residents do not know what happened with their comments.	Require a brief staff response and public report-back step.

15. Annual Review and Continuous Improvement

Each year, Saline County should review engagement results, identify participation gaps, assess which methods produced useful input, update tools and standards, and align future engagement priorities with the County Commission’s strategic and budget priorities.

The county should publish a short annual summary of engagement activity, what it learned, and what it will improve in the coming year.

Appendix A: Needed Tools

The following tools should be created and maintained as part of the framework:

- Internal engagement decision questions.
- Public-facing guide: “How Saline County Decides When and How to Engage the Public.”
- Engagement Snapshot template.
- Public facing budgeting tool.
- “What We Heard” report template.
- Regular county update newsletter.
- Community input webpage or portal.
- Community pulse polls.
- County Conversations or after-hours question-and-answer sessions.
- Smaller-town listening sessions.
- Department engagement liaison network.
- Communication and branding guide.