

Building Support for the Spectrum of Housing in the Community

Public Outreach and Engagement

Housing can be a contentious and complicated topic in communities. For this reason, cities and counties are increasing their public engagement efforts in the planning process, which offers many benefits. Engaging the public early in the decision-making process can help local public agencies avoid costly pitfalls and mistakes. Involving residents and others in the process can generate more support for the final decisions reached by city or county decision-makers. Local governments can benefit from public engagement in the following ways:

- Better identification of the public's values, ideas and recommendations;
- More informed residents;
- Improved local agency decision making and actions, with better impacts and outcomes;
- More community buy-in and support, with less contentiousness;
- More civil discussion and decision-making;
- Faster project implementation with less need to revisit issues repeatedly;
- Increased trust among residents and in local government; and
- Higher rates of community participation and leadership development.

In addition to more traditional public meetings and city council and county board of supervisors' meetings, local governments can explore a number of options when engaging their community in the planning process, including the following.

- **Advisory Committees:** A representative group, typically composed of volunteer stakeholders, is convened to guide a planning effort over an extended period of time. To ensure that membership is representative, these committees include hard-to-reach populations such as youth, immigrants and low-income individuals or advocates.



- **Charrettes:** A facilitated multiple-day process that includes interested stakeholders. Participants develop solutions that simultaneously address potential concerns.
- **Focus Groups:** Small groups of stakeholders brought together for a limited amount of time to provide their knowledge of a project/area and discuss their concerns.
- **Participatory Mapping:** Residents identify community assets, needs and opportunities on a large photo aerial map of the community. Participants can be encouraged to use sticky dots, markers or other similar items to indicate priorities and concerns.
- **Scenario Planning:** A visioning process during which the public helps a local agency generate proposed alternatives for future growth and development. Computer-based modeling tools are often used.

Public Engagement Resources

ILG offers resources for cities and counties to help them improve outreach and engagement efforts. Below is a sample of the resources available.

Engaging the Public in Planning for Housing. This resource helps inform local officials about the importance of engaging the public in planning for housing and outlines steps to ensure that their community is part of the process.

Building Healthy and Vibrant Communities: Achieving Results through Community Engagement. This resource helps local officials inform residents about what land use planning is, who is involved, why community engagement matters and ways to participate.

TIERS Public Engagement Framework. ILG has developed a new framework any local government can use to plan and execute public engagement efforts. This framework outlines five steps — Think, Initiate, Engage, Review, Shift — that local governments can follow to begin and improve public engagement processes in their communities.

Beyond the Usuals: Ideas to Encourage Broader Public Engagement in Community Decision-Making. Even with the best intentions to encourage broad participation, local officials often find that only a relatively small number of community members participate in public conversations and forums. This resource provides strategies for achieving broader representation in local public engagement efforts.

Partnering with Community-Based Organizations for More Broad-Based Public Engagement. Many agencies use a strategy of nurturing relationships with community-based organizations to better reach and engage a broader cross section of residents. The important benefits from these partnerships include the ability to:

- Extend the agency’s education and outreach capacities so more residents are aware and informed;
- Balance the most involved advocates’ input with perspectives representing more of the community at large;
- Reduce misperceptions, mistrust and contentiousness;
- Identify broader community-based resources and recommendations;
- Develop communication channels for keeping people informed over time;
- Enhance the cultural competency of engagement plans and increase the ability to translate issues into relevant questions/framing and accessible language; and
- Reach people emotionally as well as physically.

Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and other Challenges to Public Engagement Processes.

Differences of opinion can trigger strong concerns and emotions held by community residents and groups. Such deeply held concerns can present challenges to a local agency sponsoring or organizing a public engagement process. It is important to make sure that these concerns are addressed effectively to ensure the opportunity for all perspectives to be heard. This resource assists local governments in designing and preparing for public engagement processes that are effective, responsive and civil — even when participants hold very strong views.

Effective Public Engagement through Strategic Communication. This resource offers advice on communication strategies before, during and after an agency’s public engagement effort.

Planning Public Engagement: Key Questions for Local

Officials. This resource outlines a number of questions to consider when planning outreach and engagement efforts, including:

- Is this the right issue?
- Do you have time and resources?
- Is local political leadership on board?
- Is the community included in your planning?
- Is there “history” that needs attention first?
- Is there a role for consultants?

- How will talk be linked to action?
- Will a clear purpose lead your process?
- How will participants be selected?
- How will you achieve more inclusive engagement?
- Is there a communications plan?
- Will you “close the circle” with participants and the community?
- How will you learn from the experience?

To access these resources and more, visit the ILG website at www.ca-ilg.org/engagement.

Conclusion

The League and CSAC Joint Homelessness Task Force’s goal was to gain a mutual understanding of the statewide homelessness problem and how communities were working to address it. The Task Force examined a number of innovative solutions that cities and counties are testing and implementing to improve the lives of community members throughout California.

Like most major challenges facing cities and counties, the problem of homelessness will not be solved overnight, and it continues to evolve. Underlying causes, funding, services, programs and data are constantly changing. In just the past year while the Task Force was meeting, California has

seen changes — some of them very encouraging. In the next few years, cities and counties can expect to see new funding become available, data sharing will become more streamlined and available and savings will be realized. But much work remains to be done.

As we move forward toward solutions, cities, counties, nonprofits and other stakeholders must do so together. The League and CSAC will continue this work through their policy committees and boards of directors — and cities and counties will continue this important, essential work in their communities.