

# BEYOND BUSINESS AS USUAL

In partnership with the  
Institute for Local  
Government

and

The Davenport Institute  
for Public Engagement  
and Civic Leadership at  
Pepperdine University

**Sponsored by**  
The James Irvine  
Foundation

Leaders of California's Civic  
Organizations Seek New  
Ways to Engage the Public  
in Local Governance

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*What opportunities do Californians have to engage with public issues and influence decisions that affect their lives?*

*What are ways to strengthen relations between communities and their local governments?*

We asked leaders of California's civic and community-based organizations about their views on the state of public participation in local governance. The following report explores what these civic leaders say is working, what's not, and how public engagement can be improved. Traditional models for including the public in local decision making, these leaders say, fail to meet the needs of both residents and local officials. Most see significant value and potential in more inclusive and deliberative forms of engagement, and many agree local officials are making increasing efforts to include residents more meaningfully. Overall, this research suggests civic and community-based organizations are looking for newer and more effective ways to engage the public and may be ready for stronger collaborations with local government.

The report also includes concrete recommendations for local officials and their institutions, civic leaders and their organizations, and foundations and other funders. The recommendations can help improve public engagement in local governance throughout California and, we hope, beyond.

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*Public Agenda conducted this research in partnership with the Institute of Local Government and The Davenport Institute at Pepperdine University. The work was commissioned by The James Irvine Foundation.*

*Data for this research was collected through a state-wide, representative survey of 462 leaders of civic and community-based organization that as part of their mission seek to improve local decision making by working with residents and/or local officials on issues that affect their communities ("civic leaders"). The survey was conducted between July 10 and August 22, 2012. Additional data was collected through focus groups and individual interviews with civic leaders across the state.*

**Six main findings emerged from this research.**

**1. Many civic leaders feel that the relationship between the public and local government is deeply strained on both sides.**

Civic leaders agree that public engagement is not an easy task and concede that the public is often ill informed and too busy with other matters to participate fruitfully in the decision-making process, but they are also troubled by what they see in the actions and attitudes of some local officials.

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**2. Many civic leaders believe that the traditional formats for addressing public issues do not work.**

According to these civic leaders, the typical public hearing format remains an important venue for public participation. And yet the vast majority has reservations about whether these venues successfully serve the needs of either local officials or the public.

**3. Most civic leaders say their organization has developed working relationships with local officials that are at least somewhat effective. And a good number agree local officials are trying to better engage the public.**

Our survey documents a range of activities—often one-to-one interactions—through which civic and community-based organizations attempt to bridge the gap between community members and local government. For the most part, civic leaders feel their collaborations with local officials have benefited community members and improved decision making. And many say that local officials are making more of an effort to engage the public in decision making.

**4. Civic leaders are highly receptive to more deliberative forms of public engagement as a path to improved public engagement. But some worry that such approaches may backfire by first raising and then dashing public expectations.**

Although these civic leaders have limited experience collaborating with local officials on public engagement processes that foster dialogue and deliberation among diverse residents, the vast majority see such engagement methods as an intriguing possibility with benefits for both the public decision-making process and community members. Yet, some civic leaders are concerned that local officials won't commit to the process, leaving residents disappointed.

**5. Most civic leaders are confident in their capacity to implement a deliberative public engagement strategy.**

Few civic leaders seem daunted by the prospect of implementing an effective deliberative public engagement scenario. Even civic leaders who have little experience with this type of engagement are

confident in their organization's ability to implement them. While this finding is encouraging, it also raises the question of whether civic leaders underestimate the challenges of a fully inclusive and meaningful engagement approach.

**6. Some regional differences: Civic leaders from nonurban Northern California are comparatively less equipped to collaborate with local officials on more inclusive public engagement efforts.**

In addition, this survey found that urban civic leaders are most likely to lament a lack of opportunities for the public to effectively participate in local government.

**Special Focus: Public engagement in disenfranchised communities**

To better understand the extent to which public engagement efforts in California are inclusive of and responsive to all sectors of the public, we sought to learn more about the views of civic leaders whose organizations primarily serve traditionally disenfranchised communities, especially low-income, immigrant and ethnic minority populations, through in-depth interviews.

These leaders expressed even greater frustration with the status quo than other civic leaders statewide. They are more frustrated by the existing process and more critical of local officials. At the same time, our interviewees stressed that they see their organizations as necessary partners with both the public and officials: They develop community knowledge and trust, bring diverse groups of residents to the table and offer officials structured opportunities to access these resources. To overcome the obstacles they face in their public engagement efforts, these organizations work specifically on building personal and one-to-one connections, both with local officials and with their own communities. Despite challenges, many of our interviewees feel that compared with just a few years ago, public engagement in California has improved. They attribute most of the progress to the increasingly sophisticated work of organizations like theirs, which are becoming established and respected actors in the civic arena.

## Recommendations for supporting more effective and inclusive public engagement

Based on this research, as well as its companion study with California's local officials and decades of experience supporting sound public engagement, Public Agenda proposes a number of recommendations for local officials and civic and community-based organizations who seek to improve the public decision-making process by including broad cross sections of the public in meaningful deliberations, as well as for foundations and other supporters interested in funding these efforts. These are the main ideas in brief:

### BUILDING CAPACITY FOR STRONGER PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

#### **Local officials and their institutions can gain from:**

- Partnering with community-based organizations
- Hiring and training staff to increase public engagement skills
- Networking with colleagues who have effective practices
- Evaluating local efforts



#### **Civic leaders and their organizations can gain from:**

- Partnering with local officials
- Hiring and training staff to increase public engagement skills
- Networking and sharing resources with other organizations
- Evaluating local efforts



#### **Funders can make a difference by supporting:**

- Partnerships between public officials and local organizations
- Trainings and technical assistance
- Experiments, including use of online engagement tools
- Research, evaluation and knowledge sharing



For more information on this study and its companion study with California's local public officials, visit: <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-engagement-in-california>