

Three Orientations of Local Government to Public Engagement: Passive – Active – Sustaining

Long championed by advocates of public engagement, the benefits of more direct public participation in local government decision-making are becoming better understood and accepted. Increasingly, local governments are seeking to implement public engagement initiatives in an effort to create more effective and democratic governance. Considering public engagement along a continuum from “passive” to “active” to “sustaining” may help a community consider where its own perspectives and practices on these matters presently fall, and to consider if more needs to be done.



PASSIVE

ACTIVE

SUSTAINING

Throughout California, most local agency efforts to involve residents in public participation occur occasionally as one-time public engagement activities that are focused on issues such as a general plan update, municipal budgeting, a public works project, a public safety issue, a climate change plan, etc. Fewer local governments think about and “embed” a capacity to regularly consider, design, use and improve public engagement tools and strategies as an ongoing part of local governance.

However, the benefits of sustained, effective and inclusive public engagement are significant. They include: better identification of the public’s values and ideas; more informed residents; improved local agency decision-making and actions; and more public trust and confidence in local government. There is no clear right or wrong when it comes to what any local agency does in regard to sustaining public engagement. What is “right” is what makes sense for a community given its public engagement goals, needs and opportunities.

There are several useful caveats for any effort that seeks to embed a greater capacity for, and use of, public engagement. These include the following:

- Local officials and residents alike bring an understanding of public engagement based on what they have seen and experienced. This can be an advantage or a limitation. The best initial strategy is a willingness to learn more about public engagement purposes, principles and capacity building approaches.
- Sustained public engagement is more likely to be useful and successful when it is timely and directly relevant to issues that matter to the community, and invested with sufficient attention and resources to be effective and to make a difference.
- The development of a more encompassing and sustaining public engagement plan or strategy is best pursued as a partnership involving local officials and the community.

Working from less to more of a “sustaining” commitment to public engagement, the following three categories can help local officials and civic leaders to be more aware of their present efforts to involve the public and also suggest approaches that more intentionally embed public participation into local decision-making.

BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



Better identification of the public’s values and ideas; More informed residents;



Improved local agency decision-making and actions;



More public trust and confidence in local government.

1 | PASSIVE

Local Agency Public Engagement: A *Passive* Orientation

- Generally, public engagement efforts focus on the minimum legal requirements for public engagement, including public comment periods and public hearings.
- There are few if any commonly accepted local agency public engagement routines or protocols, and practices vary significantly from department to department.
- Advances made in public engagement practices generally rely on the actions of “champions” - individuals in local government or in the community - that encourage or call for a fuller and more participatory public engagement effort to address a particular issue.
- There are few (if any) organized efforts to increase the agency’s or the community’s knowledge of public engagement practices.

2 | ACTIVE

Local Agency Public Engagement: An *Active* Orientation

- The local agency sets at least some goals that specifically call for a more informed and engaged community.
- Expectations exist that more extensive and deliberative public engagement will be used in identified local agency decision-making (such as land use planning, local budgeting, transportation or economic development).
- The city, county or special district often turns to public engagement protocols and practices based on previous experiences; and some efforts are made to learn from and draw on both past and ongoing public engagement activities.
- Efforts are made to enhance the public engagement-related knowledge, skills and strategies of local officials to support the pursuit of more effective and inclusive public engagement (such as council or board member workshops, staff training opportunities or information gathering from other local agencies).
- Public engagement opportunities are clearly and broadly communicated to residents and other community stakeholders through multiple sources including: the local agency website, listservs, the community’s print and electronic media (including ethnic media, social media and other channels) in languages appropriate to community members.
- Local agencies make the effort to enhance public engagement-related knowledge, skills and capacities of local residents so they better understand local government and can participate more effectively. This may include citizen academies, community leadership development and other public engagement capacity building assistance for community organizations.
- Residents are asked about their public engagement experiences during specific public engagement activities (and perhaps in general resident surveys).

3 | SUSTAINING

Local Agency Public Engagement: A *Sustaining* Orientation

In addition to some characteristics on the “active” list, a “sustaining” orientation to public engagement may be characterized by the following elements:

- A longer-term and “co-produced” public engagement plan is developed by local agency officials/staff with community member input. The plan outlines how the local government may best develop and maintain a capacity for the ongoing use of public engagement approaches to address appropriate local issues.
- There may be one or more locally enacted public engagement-related “legal frameworks” - perhaps local ordinances passed by city councils or county boards of supervisors - that lay out direction, guidance and review protocols for the jurisdiction’s public engagement activities.¹
- The agency adopts a set of principles that generally define and encourage the use of effective, inclusive and authentic public engagement as appropriate, often clarifying administrative oversight responsibilities for these tasks.
- Checklists, protocols or a “toolkit” to guide information sharing with the community may be developed. These documents could help determine appropriate public engagement approaches and implementation strategies.
- The city, county or special district continues to add to its toolkit of process approaches that are appropriate to different needs and purposes; and process design follows a consideration of whose participation is sought and responds to the language, culture and meeting/process needs and comfort of those individuals. Offering the public options for their engagement is considered whenever possible.
- Established public engagement-related plans and performance goals for appropriate local agency departments are in place.²
- There are established public engagement task descriptions and performance criteria for relevant individual agency staff.
- Local government staff/offices have named public engagement responsibilities, and/or (where available resources make it possible) a staff/office position primarily “charged” with public engagement responsibilities for the local agency.
- In addition to stand-alone efforts to enhance the public engagement-related knowledge, skills and capacities of local residents, the participants of citizen academies (and similar leadership development programs) are connected to future public engagement activities and to opportunities for ongoing public service on formal and informal local boards, commissions, committees and task forces.
- Local agencies take time to develop mutual partnerships with neighborhood and community organizations to involve their members (and perhaps the wider community) in appropriate public engagement activities over time. In some cases this may include structured relationships/agreements between neighborhood associations or community groups with one or more local government departments for the purpose of ensuring neighborhood or broader community engagement in specific policy areas.
- These community “partners” have the opportunity to share engagement experiences with one another and participate in assessing the effectiveness of the public engagement agreements/protocols.
- There is an established and ongoing body, process or protocol that provides community representatives with input into the direction, operation and adoption of a local public engagement plan, system or set of practices.
- An established framework is consistently applied for the review and assessment of local agency-related public engagement, with a commitment to share results broadly across the local agency and the community alike and to apply the lessons learned to future public engagement activities.

¹ See, for example, information about the City of Oakland’s Budget Process Transparency and Public Participation Policy at: www.oaklandwiki.org/Budget_Process_Transparency_Ordinance. Also see “Making Public Participation Legal” available through the National Civic League at: http://ncl.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=213&Itemid=228

² For one example, see the City of Portland’s Public Involvement Advisory Council (PIAC) at: www.portlandoregon.gov/oni/48951.

Conclusion & Caveats

A community with a “sustaining orientation” to public engagement may build on the practices of an “active orientation,” adding those appropriate additional practices and capacities that help support and maintain the effective and strategic use of public engagement over time as appropriate.

This capacity will allow a community to continually scan its public, civic and business sectors for opportunities that call for more participatory and deliberative engagement. The community will have the vision, leadership, knowledge, capacities, protocols and skills to successfully assess the need for public engagement in given instances and, as appropriate, craft the best strategic response.

This type of community will also prepare its residents to participate, and its local officials to seek community input. As resources allow, it will also develop the skills among local government staff to design and, when appropriate, to facilitate public processes. It will create the public engagement goals, principles, protocols and plans that will guide and direct desired participatory practices. And finally, it will create structures where residents and local officials can jointly develop overall engagement plans and protocols, assess their progress, learn together and continue to adapt their public engagement efforts to ever changing local needs.

It is important to stress that there are few, if any, individual California cities or counties that have adopted all of these ideas relating to sustaining public engagement. However, each of these practices has occurred in one or more communities in California or elsewhere. A “sustaining orientation” toward public engagement is a goal that interested communities may wish to set and then pursue by appropriate steps or stages, assessing and adapting their work as they go.

About the Institute for Local Government

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