Engaging the Public in Economic Development

The loss of redevelopment agencies coupled with a downturn in the economy has left many cities and counties seeking new ways to approach local economic development. One essential economic development tool that may often be underused is public engagement – involving community members in charting a path to shared prosperity and an improved quality of life. Engaging the public in an authentic and practical way can help develop a shared understanding of local economic development policies and programs, increasing their potential effectiveness and impact over time. Understanding the unique conditions within one’s jurisdiction and how they affect the diverse community sectors can support short and long term priorities in a way that encourages economic competitiveness and increases fiscal health.

Because local challenges and opportunities are as varied as the individual communities themselves, engaging the public could help ensure that the economic development strategy is aligned with the community’s needs. Engaging the public in local economic development can help build support for the adoption and implementation of future initiatives.

There are no “silver bullets.” Economic development is often an elusive and difficult challenge for communities because it relies on a large number of interrelated factors. The physical infrastructure, human capital and entrepreneurial support network all play a part in determining the overall economic health of a city. Public engagement provides opportunities to improve each of these areas using the amassed wisdom and insight of the citizens who will be most directly affected by the success or failure of any economic development plan.

For more, see [www.ca-ilg.org/basics-public-engagement](http://www.ca-ilg.org/basics-public-engagement)
“Why Are We Doing This?”

Before deciding to engage the public in economic development strategy or activities, it’s important to clearly define the desired goals of the public engagement effort. It’s often helpful to consult with relevant industry and community leaders about the purposes and components of a public engagement strategy. If it’s unclear who may be appropriate to consult, an assessment of your community’s business, transportation, non-profit, health and educational partners may be a good place to start.

“We Want a Nordstrom”

Many residents may have a clear idea about what they want in their community, but as economic development professionals know, achieving some goals is much easier said than done. It’s important to provide public engagement participants the information or access to expertise that is necessary to help elicit informed input. This does not mean that each participant has to be an economic development expert, but it’s important to set expectations appropriately.

“How Do We Get There?”

There are many approaches to engaging the public in economic development. Regardless of the approach that is selected, it’s important to note the primary purpose of the engagement effort is to help identify and shape economic development strategies and actions, rather than to persuade residents to accept a previously formulated plan. It’s important for the public to both feel as if they have significant opportunities to modify the plan through their input and that they actually have such opportunities. Methods include asset mapping, community visioning and collaborative workshops. One can also include other approaches such as incorporating economic development planning into other required efforts or partnering with other organizations within the development community. Digital engagement choices are also plentiful. Some options include: surveys, online public brainstorming, mobile polling and use of social media. For more information see the ILG’s Technology and Public Engagement resources.

“Who Should Be Involved?”

A public engagement process is strengthened when it includes a diverse cross-section of the community. Consider involving community leaders from neighborhood organizations, clergy and congregations, industry, nonprofit and academic institutions that broadly reflect the population of residents. Consider including representatives of varying ages, ethnicities and socio-economic statuses.

After identifying who to engage, the next step is to identify how and where to engage them. Language barriers, capacity, location and timeline should be considered. Time spent on these questions will lead to more successful public engagement outcomes later.

“One Size Does Not Fit All”

It is important to utilize multiple communications formats or processes that will suit the needs of participants. This may include online as well as face-to-face activities. Such processes should encourage authentic participation in ways that are effective, equitable and consistent with the overall goals of the economic development public engagement process. Also consider how participants can learn about the issues and stay in touch before, during and after the effort. Keep in mind the silent majorities who will never participate in this process but whose lives will be directly affected by the decisions reached during these events.

“What is the Cost?”

In addition to identifying goals, it’s important to consider how much time, staffing and other resources can be dedicated to the effort. Consensus-based recommendations and/or having to work through very complex and contentious discussions often require more preparation, implementation time and skilled facilitation. Recommendations that require 100 percent agreement can be difficult to achieve. However, if resources are limited, engaging in a respectful dialogue that ensures everyone’s views are appreciated can help build trust and understanding. If use of an outside facilitator is desired, be sure the timeline accommodates the contracting process.
Agencies throughout the state are using a variety of strategies to gain public input to inform the economic development initiatives in their community. Below are four examples:

1. **Asset mapping** is an inventory of the businesses, organizations and institutions that help create a community. At its most basic level, the asset mapping process will provide leaders with an inventory of key resources and partners that can be used in an economic development effort. A more comprehensive asset mapping initiative will provide a deep understanding of the key networks and cultural attitudes that shape the regional economy, indicate “gap” areas that require further investment and provide a baseline by which to judge future progress toward prosperity. Asset mapping was a key component in helping the Sacramento Region locate the social, material and financial assets in its community to help develop a local network of resources to target when seeking a broader base of support and partnership to help boost the sluggish economy.

---

**The Sacramento Valley’s Vision**

The recession hit the Sacramento region hard. In addition to business bankruptcies and home foreclosures, over 140,000 jobs were lost and unemployment was over 12%. In response, business leaders spearheaded an effort to bring elected officials, nonprofits, educational institutions and labor groups together to help develop a comprehensive plan aimed at accelerating job creation, and new investment in California’s capital region. The 18-month collaborative effort included a series of engagement techniques, including asset mapping, that led to the development of The Capital Region Prosperity Plan which was officially adopted by five counties, 15 cities and two workforce investment boards as their “economic game plan.” Asset mapping helped organizers identify the community members who needed to be involved. The Plan was approved as a regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, or CEDS, which allows it to access federal funds from the U.S. Department of Commerce. Organizers of the plan are working with funders to financially reward stakeholders that advance the principles and goals associated with the plan. Special software is being created to track and rate the progress on the 270 tactics of the plan. An oversight committee of regional business and economic development organizations will ensure the plan is implemented over the next five years. For more information visit [http://valleyvision.org/](http://valleyvision.org/).
2. Community visioning is a process of developing a consensus about what future the community wants, and then deciding what is necessary to achieve it. Community visioning is typically crafted through a collaborative process that involves a wide variety of community residents, stakeholders and elected officials coming together to identify common goals, values and strategies of their community. As illustrated in the North Coast Prosperity story below, community visioning involves early and continuous public involvement in the process and encourages the full participation of all community members in goal development, action planning and implementation to create a roadmap of collaborative action in achieving the economic development outcomes for the region.

**North Coast Prosperity**

In an effort to create a comprehensive economic development strategy for the region, Humboldt County formed partnerships with several economic-focused organizations to help engage more than 450 stakeholders ranging from business owners and elected officials to community members, education professionals and tribal leaders. The project spanned three years and was implemented in three phases to maximize participation and results. Starting the process with industry leader discussions and an industry leader council to review and prioritize ideas from a business point of view was critical to building credibility. In phase two, the leaders engaged residents, business/civic leaders and economic development professionals through one-on-one interviews to help identify 18 different topics on which to engage the community at large. The North Coast Prosperity Network team then invited the community to attend a launch party for the initiative. The 130 people who attended were asked to join one of 18 citizen action teams designed to discuss the topics and prioritize economic challenges. Feedback from residents showed that people preferred smaller group discussions and found them more productive than larger forums. Throughout the process, the organizers asked for feedback on the process and plan to ensure that the community input was understood and represented correctly. The extensive public engagement effort not only resulted in a comprehensive report that outlines the regions’ greatest economic opportunities, but also helped members of the community better understand their roles in improving the local economy. For more information, visit [http://www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement-case-stories/humboldt-county-engages-public-inform-its-economic-development](http://www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement-case-stories/humboldt-county-engages-public-inform-its-economic-development).
3. **Incorporate into existing required efforts:** Updates and revisions to General Plans, Specific Plans or other land use planning and zoning provisions are a valuable avenue for actively engaging the public in economic development decisions. General plans and other land use and development plans and policies are key components of a community’s economic development potential, as they influence decisions to attract, retain and expand local businesses and employment opportunities. In addition to the more formal public hearing process, a variety of public participation strategies can be used to broaden and deepen the involvement and commitment of local residents and stakeholders in developing and carrying out these plans and strategies. In Fresno, the General Plan update process in 2011 offered an opportunity to engage the public in developing such a strategy and to restore a sense of community, fiscal responsibility and economic vitality.

**Fresno**

With areas of significant poverty and a pattern of urban sprawl, the City of Fresno saw a critical need to develop a new strategy to guide future development. The General Plan update process represented an ideal opportunity to engage the public in developing a strategy to address broad community needs, restore economic vitality and a sense of pride and community. To do this, the city looked to its community partners, such as the Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries and the West Fresno Family Resource Center, for help in reaching out and engaging residents who had limited prior experience with city government and its planning process. Many of these organizational partners knew one another well and were accustomed to collaborating. These long-term partnerships helped to overcome immigrant residents’ resistance and mistrust based on their experiences with government in their countries of origin. To begin the process, the community organizations used two universal languages: food and art. Creating a festival-type spirit was not only important for relationship building through one-on-one conversations, but also to slowly introduce city planning and policies in a way that was relevant to many cultures. The city and its partners set the stage by framing the conversation in terms of community values rather than city policies. In developing the outreach program, they asked, “How do we help people feel that ‘this process matters to me, my family and my neighborhood’?” Fresno invited conversation through its partner organizations to create a truly collaborative process with the community’s diverse residents. Initial community meetings and listening sessions successfully brought hundreds of people into the planning process to share their neighborhood priorities first-hand and help shape planning for the future. For more information visit: [www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement-case-story/community-partners-help-city-fresno-shape-its-general-plan-update](http://www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement-case-story/community-partners-help-city-fresno-shape-its-general-plan-update).
4. **Collaborate or Partner.** Regional collaborations and partnerships are being implemented to address economic and societal challenges that are too large or complex to be solved by any single organization. Regional collaborations between business, government, nonprofit and philanthropy sectors can lead to an increase in opportunities and resources. Several communities, including those in the East Bay, have been successful in utilizing partnerships to foster economic development in the region.

**East Bay Regional Collaboration**

In a post-redevelopment world, competition can be fierce. While competition between neighboring cities and counties can spark activity, avoiding destructive competition that pits communities against one another can make it easier for cities to improve their fiscal bottom line. A diverse group of cities and partners in the East Bay is showing that cooperation and collaboration among neighboring communities and the business sector can pay big dividends in new jobs which enhances economic development for all. The East Bay Economic Development Alliance (East Bay ADA) is a public/private partnership representing the cities in Alameda and Contra Costa counties as well as businesses, universities and community colleges and community groups. The membership-based group convenes on a regular basis to share information and strategies that advance regional interests. The group develops marketing materials and strategic relationships to attract and retain businesses and to promote workforce development programs. Through this collaboration, city leaders learn about potential opportunities and contribute to the future economic competitiveness of the region. This coordinated economic development partnership is creating a culture of stewardship, innovation and action that is leading to prosperity and economic gains and benefitting the region’s residents-regardless of which city they happened to live, work or play. For more information visit [www.westerncity.com/Western-City/May-2013/Collaboration-Promotes-Economic-Development/](http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/May-2013/Collaboration-Promotes-Economic-Development/).
Lessons Learned from Successful Efforts

**Collaboration Pays Off.** Public engagement efforts may have significant costs of time, staffing and financial resources, so it can be beneficial to leverage funding and resources from several parties. Determine opportunities where the city, county or region would benefit from multiple organizations collaborating to pull existing resources or seek additional funding as a group.

**Transparency is Paramount.** It is important to provide detailed information about the process and how the participants’ input will be incorporated into the final strategy or plan. In addition, providing continuous feedback throughout the process improves continued participation and helps develop a plan that will more closely represent the input given throughout the process.

**Education is Important.** Engaging those who have not traditionally been involved in economic development discussions can provide keen insight related to the values and desired direction for their community. However, in some cases, the public may need additional facts or information to enable them to provide informed input on a conversation related to economic development plan or strategy that is based in reality.

**Be Authentic and Inclusive.** A shared understanding of the region’s challenges and opportunities by diverse stakeholders will not only bring new perspectives, but may help increase the likelihood that potential economic benefits will be distributed across a wider section of community members. Authentic engagement may also serve as a foundation for future public-private partnerships that could help catalyze economic growth and increase trust and cooperation in other future planning efforts.

**Seek Ownership, as Well as Input.** Engaging stakeholders in the implementation as well as the development of an economic strategy or policy can help ensure success. In order to maintain momentum after a plan is created, it is best to prioritize issues and secure specific commitments to promote a strategy that is truly owned across sectors.

**It’s Not Just About Jobs.** A typical way of measuring the success of economic development is by the number of jobs created or tax dollars increased. These are important but can provide a narrow and elusive understanding of results. Quality of life indicators and per capita income also provide a picture of how economic development efforts will lead to increased prosperity. Understanding the wide range of factors that influence residents’ economic well-being can be a way to think more strategically about economic development and the potential for greater success. It’s a marathon, not a sprint. Participants from the community who participate actively in setting an economic development agenda and program priorities can become frustrated when results do not materialize quickly. Manage participant expectations by keeping them informed, making early, modest and achievable goals and building opportunities to learn from successes and failures as the programs mature and develop.
Additional Resources

Check out these resources found on the ILG website:

- **Why Engage the Public?**
- **Planning Public Engagement: Key Questions for Local Officials**
- **Working Effectively with Public Engagement Consultants: Tips for Local Officials**
- **Broadening Public Participation Using Online Engagement Tools**

Other valuable resources include:

- **Catalyzing Regional Economic Transformation: Lessons from Funder Collaboration in Northeast Ohio, October 2013.**

Video Chris Benner: **The Power of Just Growth**

While not directly concerned with local or regional economic development, the following may foster out of the box thinking:

- **Communities of Opportunity: A Framework for a More Equitable and Sustainable Future for All.** See [Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity](https://www.kirwaninstitute.org); Ohio State University.


**Acknowledgements**

The Institute is grateful to the following reviewers:

- Tom Bakaly, City Manager, City of Hermosa Beach
- Jacqueline Debets, Economic Development Coordinator, County of Humboldt
- Trish Kelly, Principal, Applied Development Economics, Inc.
- Shelli Mayer, Administrative Analyst, City of Hermosa Beach
- Ivin Rhyne, Economic Development Commissioner, City of Yuba City
- Micah Weingberg, CEO, Healthy Systems Project, Inc.

**Engaging the Public in Economic Development**

The Institute for Local Government
1400 K Street, Suite 205
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 658-8208 • FAX (916) 444-7535 • [www.ca-ilg.org](http://www.ca-ilg.org)