

Tips for Public Engagement on Shared Services or the Joint Use of Facilities

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To increase use, create efficiencies and reduce costs, local agencies are pursuing new opportunities for shared public services and the joint use of public facilities.

An important part of the success of such local efforts is an informed, engaged and supportive public. Especially for plans characterized by partnerships with less well-known agencies and by fears for a loss of local control, the opportunity for residents to learn more about a possible partnering department or agency and to help shape the new arrangements can be beneficial. (See www.ca-ilg.org/post/why-engage-public for more on the benefits of public engagement.)

While each local situation is unique, the Institute for Local Government offers the following general tips to help guide effective public engagement in the pursuit of successful shared services and the joint use of facilities.

Our definition of public engagement includes activities that provide opportunities to inform, consult with, and deliberate among residents and other stakeholders. (See www.ca-ilg.org/post/what-public-engagement.)

1. Clarify Your Public Engagement Goals. Determine the intended goal(s) of your public engagement meetings or other activities). Do you want to inform the public about the new local shared services or joint-use initiatives, answer questions, and/or ask residents or others to identify values, ideas or recommendations to help plan or guide such undertakings?

Information sharing should be part of any public engagement effort, as should the opportunity for participants to ask questions. However, it is also helpful to also think about the specific areas where public input would be useful and to ask participants to offer guiding values, ideas or recommendations on these points. The solicitation of public views and opinions should occur within an overall planning timeframe that allows this input to be seriously considered in final decision-making.

Approaches that include deliberation among participants, and more collective input, will typically require more time, more meeting preparation, and good facilitation. Don't set a public engagement activity up for failure by trying to accomplish – or claim - more than available time and the chosen approach will allow.

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2. Clarify Your Participation Goals. It is essential to be clear about *who* you want to participate. For your public engagement efforts, are your targeted participants:

- Members of general public?
- Users or potential users of the services or facilities in question?
- Leaders from public, civic, business, religion and/or other sectors?
- Community-based or other non-governmental organizations that are involved in the services or the facilities in question?
- The media?
- Others?

There can of course be multiple participation goals. However, each audience may require a different outreach or recruitment strategy, and in some cases perhaps a different meeting process as well.

There may be an interest in holding one or more meetings for leaders of selected organized stakeholders or groups (from public, civic, business, religious, and other sectors) to provide them with information or solicit their input. If this is your first step, it is often useful to have a broader public engagement plan, including a communications strategy, through which the general public and others will know when and how they will also have the opportunity to participate. Organized stakeholders can often help local agencies communicate with or attract the participation of the broader public.

Those with concerns about potential negative impacts of such joint use or shared service arrangements are especially important to inform and engage.

3. Choose the Most Appropriate Public Engagement Activity or Process.

Choose the kind of public engagement activity or process (or more than one approach) that will best fit your goal(s) and intended audience(s). Often these activities are oriented to either inform the public or to solicit their views and recommendations. While these activities may include online or media/communications strategies, the following ideas are primarily relevant to face-to-face public engagement-related meetings:

- To Inform

If your intent is mainly to inform, then public outreach and meetings that feature prepared materials, PowerPoint slides, and presentations by relevant agency officials may suffice. Ensure that there is agreement by all relevant agencies about the content of the information and materials to be distributed or presented and, as appropriate, a role for each of these agencies in public meetings and material preparation.

Even if the approach is primarily information sharing, interaction with attendees helps ensure understanding. To include an opportunity for questions and answers have a designated facilitator and an agreed upon process for questions to be identified and answered. At times, it can be useful to have someone facilitate who is not a representative of an involved local agency, although this is situational.

Have questioners and those responding begin by identifying themselves. If possible, it is useful to have notes taken of the questions and answers and to make these notes available to participants and/or to post them on the web pages of the appropriate agency or agencies.

Using Written Question/Comment Cards

It's generally best to use submitted written *question or comment* cards only if a large number of participants are expected or if you anticipate the need for a more controlled process.

If a process for submitting question cards is used, one option is for the questions to be read by the facilitator. However it's generally better to use question cards only to prioritize questions and to introduce the speakers and have them ask their questions themselves. The use of question cards does allow the facilitator to aggregate similar questions, to possibly get more questions addressed, and to use the available time most efficiently.

Comment cards may also be used which can either be read by the facilitator or used to introduce (or set an order) for those people who wish to make a comment. Again, this does allow the facilitator to aggregate (as appropriate) related comments by theme, to prioritize what seem to be the most pressing or relevant, and to identify speakers with unrelated comments.

As with any sort of intermediate process that may be perceived by the public as an attempt to "screen" or "censure" comments or questions, the use of these submitted cards is usually best reserved for larger or potentially unwieldy meetings. However some members of the public are more comfortable having their question or comments read by another rather than becoming a "public" speaker themselves.

- To Solicit Views and Recommendations

It can be helpful to allow a period of time for participants to ask clarifying questions prior to the opportunity for comments and recommendations as this often adds to the quality of the ideas and opinions that are expressed.

In addition to the opportunity to hear general comments from the public, meeting organizers may also identify those topics or choices about potential shared services or facility joint use for which local agencies would benefit by having more public input.

In terms of the timing, meetings to solicit input on the value and specific needs for services in the respective communities (or of facility use by different communities or local agencies) might be held quite early, prior to a decision to move forward with joint services or facility use plans. These may even be early cross-jurisdictional meetings of the public organized by a number of local agencies that are considering shared services or new joint uses of public facilities.

The public can of course also be engaged in the planning for specific shared services or joint use planning that will involve their own cities, counties or schools. Public engagement can also be sought to help monitor and assess such plans once developed and implemented.

In a public engagement processes there is a choice between asking for *individual* responses or providing an opportunity for all participants to deliberate (a back and forth, reasoned, civil discussion, often in small groups) and to provide a more *collective* set of views, recommendations or ranked choices.

Of course these collective and typically more deliberative options require more preparation and meeting time, a skilled facilitator, and the commitment (on the part of decision makers) to seriously consider the information generated. However, a more intensive deliberation, especially one that includes small group discussions, does have the potential to result in a more nuanced understanding of the public's views and values, and greater community support for shared services or a facility joint use plans.

It is always best to ask the public for ideas and recommendations on these topics that are consistent with the information they have or that you provide as part of the meeting process.

(For key questions and principles to guide effective public engagement, see www.ca-ilg.org/publicparticipation and www.ca-ilg.org/PublicEngagementPrinciples.)

Offer Different Avenues for Learning & Participation

Offering the public different avenues to learn about an issue - and different ways to become involved - adds to the number and range of residents and groups who will be effectively informed and engaged.

Use multiple outreach and communication opportunities to make information available, including local government websites, appropriate media (including ethnic media), area organization and congregation communication channels, etc. These same channels can be used to attract participation to public engagement meetings and processes.

4. Ensure Transparency. For the development of shared services and joint use planning, it is important that the planning itself, as well as any public engagement effort, be transparent to all and inclusive of appropriate partners. This can be a critical element of success over the shorter and longer term. This includes the involvement of the public throughout the planning - and implementation - process and the inclusion of the relevant local agencies and organizations in the preparation of any public information or

engagement effort. Post public engagement meetings notices, materials and notes on the websites of the relevant local agencies.

5. Educate Your Audience. Most residents will not be familiar with shared services or joint use arrangements. Nor, as noted above, will they necessarily be familiar with proposed new partners for services or facility use. This suggests that almost any public engagement meeting on the topic will to begin with a segment of information sharing.

The public may also be uninformed about the conditions and needs (especially the fiscal context) prompting an exploration of shared services and the joint use of facilities. And there may be concerns or fears that such arrangements will lead to an actual reduction of services or less access to a facility by a particular community. Information about possible shared services or the joint use of public facilities may also be the subject of rumor and speculation or incomplete media coverage.

For all these reasons it is important to provide appropriate information to public engagement meeting participants (and to other community members as well). Avoid acronyms, give the names and titles of participating/presenting agencies and agency representatives, and offer plain language descriptions of successfully implemented shared services or joint use plans in your or other jurisdictions. Don't assume an advanced level of public knowledge about these topics.

Using the points in #2 (above), it may be useful to identify the intended audiences and to select the communication vehicles and messages most likely to reach them.

Use Informational Materials and Visuals Effectively

Develop materials with the interests and knowledge of the intended audience in mind. What information will the public need that responds to their likely concerns or questions?

Informational materials should be straightforward and easy to follow, without technical language, acronyms and terms of art that would not be known to the layperson. If such terms or language are used they should be explained. As appropriate, translate these materials to languages used by your community residents.

At public engagement events, the use of visuals (PowerPoint, charts, etc.) are particularly important to identify key agencies and departments, to clarify new or potential services or joint use arrangements, to outline any proposed cost savings, and to display timelines as well as new lines of responsibility or accountability.

6. Make Public Engagement Meetings Accessible. Identify accessible and welcoming public meeting locations for potential participants. These may include public schools, community centers, libraries and other sites, as well as local government

facilities. In some cases meeting at a facility that is being considered for new joint use may be appropriate.

Consider what sites will more likely help you meet your participation goals. In scheduling meeting times, consider work, family, cultural and religious obligations. As needed, provide language translation and translated materials, as well as on-site childcare and refreshments.

7. Describe What Happens Next. Let meeting attendees know how their views or recommendations will be considered in final decision making, and what, if any, information they will subsequently receive. Also share any next steps in terms of shared services or joint use plans, decision-making and implementation.

It is also important to maintain a list of those participating in any of these public engagement activities (or who otherwise identify themselves as interested). They can then be kept abreast of progress and invited to later public engagement opportunities.

8. Express Appreciation. At public engagement meetings, or for any input received, let participants/respondents know that their attendance, questions and/or comments are appreciated and valued.

9. Evaluate. For any shared services or facilities joint use-related public engagement meeting or activity provide an opportunity for participants to assess their experience and offer feedback to organizers, preferably with written comments. Public engagement organizers should collectively debrief after any public engagement meeting to review evaluative comments, to assess the success in meeting public engagement goals, and to discuss and document lessons for future public engagement efforts. (See the Institute for Local Government's Measuring Success in Public Engagement page: <http://www.ca-ilg.org/measuring-success>.)

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The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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