



Planning Public Engagement: Key Questions for Local Officials

Cities and counties benefit from appropriate and successful engagement of the public. For instance, local agencies improve their decision-making through the solicitation and identification of community members' values, ideas and recommendations. Other outcomes include more informed and engaged residents, greater support for a public decision made, and enhanced public confidence in local government. (Also see *Why Engage the Public* www.ca-ilg.org/WhyEngage.)

However, while most public engagement strategies offer positive results, these efforts will be most effective if attention is paid to the following key questions:

- 1. Is This the Right Issue?** The targeted issue or controversy should be likely to benefit from broader resident engagement and justify the additional time and costs involved. A proposed public action or decision that involves strong feelings and opposing views, or that will benefit by asking residents about the kind of community they wish to have, may be particularly suitable. A good public engagement process should ask residents for their views rather than try to persuade them to agree with a particular plan, policy or action.
- 2. Do You Have Time and Resources?** Engaging in a public engagement process when the decision (or a major part of it) is already made - or when it's too late to integrate meaningful changes - will likely result in frustration for participants and local officials alike. Some public engagement activities will draw on staff time and/or the use of consultants and will require significant resources.
- 3. Is Local Political Leadership on Board?** Appropriate local agency leadership should be in agreement on the engagement purpose, process and use of the outcomes. Clarity among elected officials and the relevant appointed officials about the planned engagement process, and a clear delegated role for appropriate agency staff, are essential elements.
- 4. Is the Community Included in Your Planning?** Along with appropriate local officials, the planning and design of a public engagement process will often benefit from input from members of the intended participant groups and communities.
- 5. Is There "History" That Needs Attention First?** There are times when a history of mistrust or a divisive political battle has caused significant polarization in the community. This may divide officials and the community and/or cause serious rifts among community residents themselves. In these cases an "airing out" process may be needed before or as part of a new public engagement approach. Such history also makes it more important that a public engagement effort is developed collaboratively with the community.

- 6. Is There a Role for Consultants?** Is there a need for a consultant or consulting firm to take on designated public engagement design and/or delivery responsibilities? See www.ca-ilg.org/PEconsultanttips.
- 7. How Will Talk Be Linked to Action?** Good intentions and well-run meetings are not enough. It is important to be clear about how local officials will document and seriously consider the ideas, preferences or recommendations that result from a public engagement effort. This should be part of a consistent and clear message delivered to the public by the sponsoring local agency.
- 8. Will A Clear Purpose Lead Your Process?** There are dozens, even hundreds, of public engagement models and approaches. However, planning for such efforts should start by talking about purposes and goals, not processes. What public engagement outcomes will contribute to the best and most informed public decision or action? Is the goal more informed residents? Do you need a snapshot of public opinion? Do you want a deeper sense of what the public values, a collective vision of the future, or a detailed plan or design? Is less contention and greater consensus your goal? Or is it greater public support for decisions that are made? Different public engagement approaches will likely result in more or less of each of these (or other) possible outcomes. Think through and clearly identify the purpose of the planned public engagement activity. Then set participation goals, especially for those groups or communities that are harder to reach or engage. Finally, with your purpose and participants in mind, determine the process or processes that will encourage full, effective and equitable participation consistent with process purposes. See www.ca-ilg.org/pebasics
- 9. How Will Participants Be Selected?** Participants for public engagement activities can be invited/selected in a number of ways. Choices include *self-selection* (open to all who want to attend); *sponsor invitation* (to specific organizations and/or individuals); *representative selection* (systematic efforts to ensure participation reflecting the community); or a more rigorous and often costly *random sample* of the community (perhaps through random address selection or phone dialing). While public hearings must be open to all who want to attend, more deliberative processes will require more balanced participation (of views and demographics) for effectiveness and legitimacy. Emphasis may be on the participation of organized stakeholders, on members of the broader community, or on a combination of the two.
- 10. How Will You Achieve More Inclusive Engagement?** More inclusive public engagement requires a plan, as well as help from those who understand and have relationships with those communities and constituencies you want to include. Reach out to local media (including ethnic media), clergy and congregations, leadership and advocacy groups, and others that serve your less involved populations. Co-sponsor participation processes with trusted local groups on their site. Provide age appropriate and language accessible materials and activities. In general, create your public engagement process(es) with your participation goals clearly in mind. See www.ca-ilg.org/beyondusuals and www.ca-ilg.org/inclusiveengagement.

- 11. Are You Tackling the Real Disagreements?** The desire for common understanding and agreement can be so strong that real differences are never truly addressed in a public engagement process. Especially when your goal is broader and more specific agreement, and greater public support for the decisions to be made, superficial or vague talk, and a hesitancy to confront real conflicts (due to fear or desire for civility), can leave important differences unresolved and prevent any real movement towards consensus.
- 12. Is There A Communications Plan?** A public engagement process can engage dozens or even hundreds of individuals and may result in substantial agreement among participants. But most residents will not be directly involved. Develop a communications and media plan to let residents know about the public's involvement and multiply the benefits of your engagement process.
- 13. Will You “Close the Circle” with Participants and the Community?** How will public engagement process participants and other residents know how the recommendations that resulted from these processes were considered and used by local decision makers?
- 14. How Will You Learn from the Experience?** With input from public engagement process participants, and the relevant local officials, staff and consultants, review what worked and what could be improved. Use what you learn in your next public engagement effort. Also see www.ca-ilg.org/measuringPEsuccess.

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