

What Is Public Engagement?

There are many terms that describe the involvement of the public in civic and political life. We offer one set of terms and definitions here not because we're sure these definitions are the best or most complete – or even that most people would agree with them - but because we think it's important to draw distinctions among the various ways people can become involved. It's important because understanding these differences will help local officials “fit” the best approach (or approaches) to the issue, policy or controversy at hand. The exact terms and definitions are less important than recognizing that these distinctions exist.

Civic Engagement: This is an extremely broad term that includes the many ways that community residents involve themselves in the civic and political life of their community. It encompasses volunteering as a local Little League coach, attending neighborhood or community-wide meetings, helping to build a community playground, joining a city or county clean-up effort, becoming a member of a neighborhood watch group or local commission – and much more.

Public Engagement: This is a general term we are using for a broad range of methods through which members of the public become more informed about and/or influence public decisions. Given our work to support good public involvement in California counties and cities, we are especially focused on how local officials use public involvement practices to help inform residents and help guide the policy decisions and actions of local government.

Public Information/Outreach: This kind of public engagement is characterized by one-way local government communication to residents and other members of the community to inform them about a public problem, issue or policy matter.

Examples could include: an article on a city or county website describing the agency's current budget situation; a city mailing to neighborhood residents about a planned housing complex; or a presentation by a county health department to a community group about substandard housing or “bird” flu policies.

Public Consultation: This kind of public engagement generally includes instances where local officials ask for the individual views or recommendations of residents about public actions and decisions, and where there is generally little or no discussion to add additional knowledge and insight and promote an exchange of viewpoints.

Examples include typical public hearings and council or board comment periods, as well as resident surveys and polls. A public meeting that is mainly focused asking for on “raw” individual opinions and recommendations about budget recommendations would fit in this category.

Public Participation/Deliberation: This form of public engagement refers to those processes through which participants receive new information on the topic at hand and through discussion and deliberation jointly prioritize or agree on ideas and/or recommendations intended to inform the decisions of local officials.

Examples include community conversations that provide information on the budget and the budget process and ask participants to discuss community priorities, confront real trade-offs, and craft their collective recommendations. Or the development of a representative group of residents who draw on community input and suggest elements and ideas for a general plan update.

Sustained Public Problem Solving: This form of public engagement typically takes place through the work of place-based committees or task forces, often with multi-sector membership, that over an extended period of time address public problems through collaborative planning, implementation, monitoring and/or assessment.

Conclusion: As you think about your own planned public engagement efforts, what approaches or combination of approaches will best meet your agency’s circumstances and goals?

This tipsheet is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute’s resources on public engagement, visit www.ca-ilg.org/engagement. To access this resource directly, go to www.ca-ilg.org/WhatIsPublicEngagement.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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