

PLANNING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Key Questions for Local Officials



Local agencies benefit from appropriate and successful engagement of the public. For instance, public engagement can improve 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.

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?

Discuss and decide if there is a need for a consultant or consulting firm to take on designated public engagement design and/or delivery responsibilities.

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?

Planning for public engagement 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 want a deeper sense of what the public values, a collective vision of the future, or a detailed plan or design? 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.

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 both.

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

11

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. However, 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.

12

Will You “Close the Circle” with Participants and the Community?

Consider how public engagement process participants and other residents will know how the recommendations that resulted from these processes were considered and used by local decision makers.

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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.

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About the Institute for Local Government

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