How to Engage

There are many ways to get involved in local land use planning decisions. Your city or county may use community organizations, chambers of commerce, neighborhood associations or other groups to let you know about upcoming land use decisions. Contact the planning department in your community to learn more about the ways that you can be involved in local land use decisions. Opportunities for engagement may include:

Advisory Committees
A representative group of typically volunteer stakeholders are convened to guide a planning effort over an extended period of time. To ensure that membership is representative, be sure to include hard to reach populations such as youth, immigrants and low-income individuals or advocates.

Charrettes
A facilitated multiple-day process that includes interested stakeholders. Participants develop solutions that address potential concerns simultaneously.

Focus Groups
Small groups of stakeholders brought together for a limited amount of time to provide their knowledge of a project/area and discuss their concerns.

Participatory Mapping
Residents identify community assets, needs and opportunities on a large photo aerial map of the community. Participants can be encouraged to use sticky dots, markers or other similar items.

Scenario Planning
A visioning process during which the public helps a local agency generate proposed alternatives future growth and development. Computer-based modeling tools are often used.

The Institute for Local Government is the nonprofit research education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. Its mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial and easy-to-use resources for California communities.

The Institute’s current program areas include:
- Public Engagement
- Local Government Basics
- Ethics and Transparency
- Sustainable Communities
- Collaboration and Partnerships

Land Use Planning Resources
- Engaging the Public in Planning, Housing & Sustainability www.ca-ilg.org/engaging-public-planning-housing-sustainability
- Understanding the Basics of Land Use Planning www.ca-ilg.org/post/understanding-basics-land-use-and-planning-series
- Land Use and Environment www.ca-ilg.org/land-use-environment
- SB 375 Resource Center www.ca-ilg.org/sb-375-resource-center

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Who is Involved

Everyone is affected by land use decisions. However, because planning issues can be complex, residents are often unaware of how, where and when to get involved. Local officials and planning staff have the opportunity to harness community interest by encouraging the public to actively participate in the planning process.

Typical land use decisions involve the following:

- **City Council / Board of Supervisors**: A legislative group of elected residents that oversees local government operations.
- **Developer / Applicant**: Any person, firm or entity which seeks local agency approvals for all or part of a development project.
- **General Public / Community**: A diverse group of people that may or may not share the same set of goals and concerns.
- **Interest Groups / Stakeholders**: Organizations or individuals with an identifiable stake in the issue focused on a particular priority (i.e. agriculture, business and environment).
- **Planning Commission**: A committee of residents who have been appointed by your city council or county board of supervisor to review and consider land use matters such as general plans, rezoning, use permits and subdivisions. There are also other boards and commissions, such as the architectural review board that can be involved in the process.
- **Planning Staff**: Public employees that administer zoning ordinance and general plan provisions and provide technical planning services to a local agency. Additional local agency staff (such as public works, police, fire and building departments) often advise planners during the review process.

Why Community Engagement Matters

Public engagement processes can take time and scarce resources to implement effectively. They are not always appropriate in all situations; however, there are many practical reasons to engage residents in planning.

- Better Identification of the Public's Values
- Increased Civility
- Reduced Risk of Legal Challenge
- Faster and more Streamlined Project Implementation
- More Informed Residents
- Improved decision-making
- Higher Rates of Community Participation and Leadership Development

“Involve the public early in the front end of designing a public process and be open to what the public wants to do. If you go in with a clear vision of what you want out of it people will sense that and get angry. Involving the public in a planning process builds credibility and support for changes that are implemented.”

– ROD GOULD, CITY MANAGER, CITY OF SANTA MONICA