

Bridging the Divide: Creating Joint Strategies for Effective Public Engagement - Discussion Notes

On April 21, 2011, local officials and community-based organizations in the South San Joaquin Valley came together for frank and facilitated discussions on ways to improve public engagement efforts in their communities.

Co-hosted by the Institute for Local Government and the James Irvine Foundation for the South San Joaquin Valley Division of the League of California Cities, over thirty-five of these local stakeholders met at the Clovis Veterans Memorial District to share successes and challenges in creating effective public engagement.

The outcomes of this first, in what may be a series of meetings, were:

- Enhanced relationships among local elected officials and community based organizations (CBO) in the South San Joaquin Valley region.
- Better understanding of how local government and CBO's work together to facilitate broader and more effective public engagement in local decision making.
- Increased understanding of the strengths and limitations of each sector and how each can contribute to public engagement goals.
- Shared public engagement ideas, practices and success stories that can be applied in daily work.

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Discussion Notes:

Elements of Success-

- Repetition
- Go where people are
- Leadership & "Getting to know you" activities
- Youth candidates forums/youth engagement
- Media training to tell youth stories
- Education on issues related to rate increases
- Citizen's academy (Fresno)
- Engage those in opposition on controversial issues
- Mutual respect – all ideas valid
- Include diverse represented; especially those most impacted

- Include subject matter experts to educate on issues
- Good communication – limit “policy speak”
- Braceros – engages immigrants on wide variety of issues
 - Exchange information with officials
- Find common ground; collaborate for “win-win” solutions
- Pass city resolutions locally to build on national efforts
- Narrow the topics
- Know your audience
- Meet needs – childcare
- Create & use data
- Fair & just attitude
- Bridge the divide b/t everyday life and policy
- Use of social media and technology, esp to engage youth
- “Auto” phone calls to all residents
- E-mail blasts; nationwide
- Good facilitator
- Open source mapping tools (free) to share public transit experiences – “Bus Tracker”
- Access through TV and web

Challenges-

- Mistrust of public officials, community members
- Reductions in resources
- Messaging
- Receive complaints but not enough recommended solutions
- Being proactive on educating about issues
- Language barriers – materials discussion – translation
- Trust diminishes when actions aren’t followed through, credibility as well
- Time of meetings inconvenient for day workers – length
- Lack of community generated data
- CBO’s – increase expertise on content, not just process
- Tough to balance “bias”; advocacy on single issues vs. broad policy issues
- Public embarrassment tactics
- Same voices – who do the #’s represent?
- Fear of backlash/retaliation
- Public comment time
- Residents may feel no one will understand or listen to their concerns
- Public input not always welcome
- Public officials may not live in the community; therefore low buy-in
- Technology infrastructure

Actions-

- Partner *before* crisis/meetings
- Clarify roles/responsibilities
- Meeting planning/logistics to improve accessibility
- Introduce community to policy makers
- Don't assume why people don't participate – collect data
- “Legacy” media – TV, radio, newspaper
- “photo voice” project with youth

Table Signs:

Real Ongoing Dialog-

- More community building
- Share personal stories
- Build community voice
- Accountability on both parts

Government by the People-

- Engage citizens in a way that makes sense to them
- Improve accessibility
- Keep it simple for constituents
- Assess root causes of non-engagement by collecting local data
- Remove obstacles
- Grassroots involvement
- Narrow topic
- Narrow the focus

Don't Sweat the “No” Stuff!-

- Overcome negative
- Don't be discouraged

Leverage Community Assets-

- Contact community leaders
- Collaboration with community entities
- Leaders participate in community events
- Stay engaged

Government Education-

- Educate/inform organize to action
- Educate children about local gov

Communicate to Common Ground-

- Avoid polarization through effective communication
- Listen more, talk less
- Be persistent
- Be consistent and constant
- Use new and legacy media