



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. This is 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.

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Why Should I do it?

Local governments throughout California are applying a variety of public engagement strategies and approaches to address issues ranging from land use and budgeting to climate change and public safety. They are discovering a number of benefits that can result from the successful engagement of their residents in local decision making.

What is Public Engagement?



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

This is an extremely broad term that includes the many ways that 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, 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 to inform them about a public problem, issue or policy matter.

Examples could include: a website article describing the agency's current budget situation; a mailing to neighborhood residents about a planned housing complex; or a presentation by a 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 on asking for "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.

Why Engage the Public?



BETTER IDENTIFICATION OF THE PUBLIC'S VALUES, IDEAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Elections help identify voter preferences and communication with individual constituents provide additional information to local officials about resident views on various topics. However gaps often remain in understanding the public's views and preferences on proposed public agency actions and decisions. This can especially be the case for residents or populations that tend to participate less frequently or when simple "pro" or "con" views don't help solve the problem at hand. Good public engagement can provide more nuanced and collective views about an issue by a broader spectrum of residents.



MORE INFORMED RESIDENTS - ABOUT ISSUES AND ABOUT LOCAL AGENCIES

Most residents do not regularly follow local policy matters carefully. While a relatively small number do, most community members are not familiar, for instance, with the ins and outs of a local agency budget and budget process, or knowledgeable about planning for a new general plan, open space use or affordable housing. Good public engagement can present opportunities for residents to better understand an issue and its impacts and to see local agency challenges as their challenges as well.



IMPROVED LOCAL AGENCY DECISION - MAKING AND ACTIONS, WITH BETTER IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

Members of the public have information about their community's history and needs. They also have a sense of the kind of place where they and their families want to live. They can add new voices and new ideas to enrich thinking and planning on topics that concern them. This kind of knowledge, integrated appropriately into local decision making, helps ensure that public decisions are optimal for the community and best fit current conditions and needs.



MORE COMMUNITY BUY-IN AND SUPPORT, WITH LESS CONTENTIOUSNESS

Public engagement by residents and others can generate more support for the final decisions reached by local decision makers. Put simply, participation helps generate ownership. Involved residents who have helped to shape a proposed policy, project or program will better understand the issue itself and the reasons for the decisions that are made. Good communications about the public's involvement in a local decision can increase the support of the broader community as well.



MORE CIVIL DISCUSSIONS AND DECISION MAKING

Earlier, informed and facilitated deliberation by residents will frequently offer a better chance for more civil and reasoned conversations and problem solving than public hearings and other less collaborative opportunities for public input.



FASTER PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION WITH LESS NEED TO REVISIT AGAIN

Making public decisions is one thing; successfully implementing these decisions is often something else altogether. The buy-in discussed above, and the potential for broad agreement on a decision, are important contributors to faster implementation. For instance, a cross section of the community may come together to work on a vision or plan that includes a collective sense of what downtown building height limits should be. If this is adopted by the local agency and guides planning and development over time, the issue will be less likely to reoccur as an issue for the community and for local officials. In general, good public engagement reduces the need for unnecessary decision-making “do-over.”



MORE TRUST - IN EACH OTHER AND IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Whatever their differences, people who work together on common problems usually have more appreciation of the problem and of each other. Many forms of public engagement provide opportunity to get behind peoples’ statements and understand the reasons for what they think and say. This helps enhance understanding and respect among the participants. It also inspires confidence that problems can be solved – which promotes more cooperation over time. Whether called social capital, community building, civic pride or good citizenship, such experiences help build stronger communities. Additionally, when a local agency promotes and is a part of these processes - and takes the ideas and recommendations of the public seriously - a greater trust and confidence in local government often results.



HIGHER RATES OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Engaging the public in new ways offers additional opportunities for people to take part in the civic and political life of their community. This may include community members who have traditionally participated less than others. These are avenues for not only contributing to local decisions but for residents to gain knowledge, experience and confidence in the workings of their local government. These are future neighborhood volunteers, civic and community leaders, commissioners and elected officials. In whatever role they choose, these are individuals who will be more prepared and more qualified as informed residents, involved citizens and future leaders.

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About the Institute for Local Government

This tip sheet 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, the California State Association of Counties and the California Special Districts Association.

For more information and to access the Institute’s resources on public engagement, visit www.ca-ilg.org/publicengagement.

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