

TESTING THE WATERS

In partnership with the
Institute for Local
Government

and

The Davenport Institute
for Public Engagement
and Civic Leadership at
Pepperdine University

Sponsored by
The James Irvine
Foundation

California's Local Officials
Experiment with New Ways
to Engage the Public

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What opportunities do Californians have to engage with public issues and influence decisions that affect their lives?

What are ways to strengthen relations between communities and their local governments?

This report explores the attitudes of California's local officials toward public participation in local governance. These officials believe that the current models for including the public in local decision making fail to meet the needs of both residents and local officials. Most local officials seek broad-based participation from the public and want to hear more about approaches that have worked elsewhere. Many are already experimenting with more inclusive and deliberative forms of engagement. Overall, this study suggests California's local officials may be ready for newer and more effective ways to engage the public and for stronger collaborations with community-based organizations.

The report also includes concrete recommendations for local officials and their institutions, civic leaders and their organizations, and foundations and other funders. The recommendations can help improve public engagement in local governance throughout California and, we hope, beyond.

Public Agenda conducted this research in partnership with the Institute of Local Government and The Davenport Institute at Pepperdine University. The work was commissioned by The James Irvine Foundation.

Data for this research was collected through a statewide, representative survey of 900 local officials, conducted between July 10 and August 23, 2012, and through additional focus groups and individual interviews with local officials across the state. The study included both elected and nonelected officials.

These are the main findings of this research.

1. Local officials perceive the public as largely disengaged, despite many opportunities for participation.

Local officials see themselves as doing a reasonable job providing ample opportunity for the public to participate in local decision making. Yet they feel that large sectors of the public are disengaged. Most local officials view the public as largely uninformed and increasingly distrustful.

2. Local officials see shortcomings in traditional public engagement approaches.

At the same time, most local officials acknowledge that public hearings and comments are often not conducive to broad-based and thoughtful participation and that these meetings—frequently dominated by narrow interests and negative comments—may not serve the needs and skills of large sections of the public.

3. Among local officials, there is widespread interest in better ways to engage the public.

Most local officials want to learn about new and different ways to engage the public more effectively, and they seek information from various sources to do so. Many local officials also stress that, through experiences and challenges, they have come to appreciate the value of public engagement more, although some seem to have become disheartened with the public over time.

4. There is a growing awareness of deliberative public engagement processes among local officials.

Almost all local officials have participated in public engagement activities that are designed to foster dialogue and deliberation on public issues among a diverse group of residents, and that seek to increase the public's understanding of and impact on public decisions. Nearly all local officials can think of issues that would lend themselves particularly well to these techniques. But they are hesitant to overuse this approach, preferring to limit it to a smaller number of appropriate public decisions.

5. Local officials differ in their views on the benefits and costs of deliberative public engagement processes.

A large number (42 percent) of local officials are already enthusiastic supporters of deliberative public engagement. They believe it has the potential to increase officials' understanding of community concerns, bring about fresh ideas, build public support and trust and lead to more sound public decisions. Only 11 percent reject these benefits. Another large group (47 percent) evaluates the potential promise of deliberative approaches tentatively. Nonetheless, for all three groups, broad-based public participation remains the major concern.

6. Local officials are confident in their capacity to implement a deliberative engagement process.

Aside from the task of ensuring broad-based participation, local officials are quite confident in their ability to effectively implement a comprehensive deliberative public engagement process. Few officials see other major challenges to ensuring a quality process. However, there are some indications that this confidence is not always grounded in practical experience.

7. Local officials use online media and web-based engagement hesitantly.

Local officials are also experimenting with online media and digital technologies to reach out and engage the public—but not always wholeheartedly. While some feel these technologies have improved their relationships with the public, most find it difficult to assess their effectiveness.

8. Local officials report somewhat limited collaborations with community-based organizations.

Even though many local officials say they use community-based organizations and their networks to facilitate communication with the public, they typically work with them only “a little,” and comparatively few list organizations that engage with traditionally disenfranchised groups as regular collaborators in this effort, suggesting that there is potential for more and more diverse collaborations.

9. In rural communities, local officials report less public participation experience and fewer resources.

There are considerable differences across the state in the capacity and interest of local officials to explore new methods of engaging the public. In particular, officials serving rural communities report having fewer resources and less experience with deliberative forms of public engagement than their urban and suburban counterparts.

10. County officials indicate somewhat more experience with deliberative engagement approaches than city officials.

County officials report somewhat more personal experience with deliberative processes and more frequent collaborations with community-based organizations compared with city officials. They are also more likely than their municipal counterparts to believe deliberative engagement processes could lead to better public decisions.

Recommendations for supporting more effective and inclusive public engagement

Based on this research, as well as its companion study with California civic leaders and decades of experience supporting sound public engagement, Public Agenda proposes a number of recommendations for local officials and civic and community-based organizations who seek to improve the public decision-making process by including broad cross-sections of the public in meaningful deliberations, as well as for foundations and other supporters interested in funding these efforts. These are the main ideas in brief:

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR STRONGER PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Local officials and their institutions can gain from:

- Partnering with community-based organizations
- Hiring and training staff to increase public engagement skills
- Networking with colleagues who have effective practices
- Evaluating local efforts



Civic leaders and their organizations can gain from:

- Partnering with local officials
- Hiring and training staff to increase public engagement skills
- Networking and sharing resources with other organizations
- Evaluating local efforts



Funders can make a difference by supporting:

- Partnerships between public officials and local organizations
- Trainings and technical assistance
- Experiments, including use of online engagement tools
- Research, evaluation and knowledge sharing



For more information on this study and its companion study with California civic leaders, visit: <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-engagement-in-california>