



**NEW SUPERVISORS
INSTITUTE**

Session III

Materials for

Tab 9

**Public Meetings
and Public Engagement**



INSTITUTE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Promoting Good Government at the Local Level

CSAC Institute: Public Meetings and Public Engagement April 11, 2013

Session Objectives:

1. *To discuss public engagement purposes and key concepts*
2. *To learn about connecting with a broad cross-section of your county's residents*
3. *To share tips on public engagement efforts for traditional public meetings as well as for difficult topics and challenging situations*

Agenda

- What are the purposes and key concepts of public engagement?
- Reaching beyond the "usuals"
- How to enhance traditional public meetings
- Special tips for contentious meetings
- Questions & Answers

Resources and Materials

- ILG Public Engagement Program and Resource Overview:
www.ca-ilg.org/overview/public-engagement
- What is Public Engagement: www.ca-ilg.org/post/what-public-engagement
- Public Meetings and Public Engagement 101(slides):
www.ca-ilg.org/post/public-meetings-and-public-engagement-101
- Why Engage the Public: www.ca-ilg.org/post/why-engage-public
- Planning Public Engagement: Key Questions for Local Officials:
www.ca-ilg.org/PublicEngagementKeyQuestions
- Beyond the Usuals: Ideas to Encourage Broader Public Involvement in Your Community: www.ca-ilg.org/BeyondUsuals
- Dealing with Deep Held Concern (slides):
www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/webinar_3-13_highlights.pdf
- Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and Other Challenges to Public Engagement Processes: www.ca-ilg.org/DeeplyHeldConcerns

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. It's 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.

Civic Engagement: This is an extremely broad term that includes the many ways that community 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 counties and cities, 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 and other members of the community to inform them about a public problem, issue or policy matter.

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

Conclusion: As you think about your own planned public engagement efforts, what approaches or combination of approaches will best meet your agency’s circumstances and goals?

This tipsheet 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 and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute’s resources on public engagement, visit www.ca-ilg.org/engagement. To access this resource directly, go to www.ca-ilg.org/WhatIsPublicEngagement.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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New Supervisors Institute

Public Meetings and Public Engagement



ILG Mission

- Promoting good government at the local level
- Practical, impartial and easy-to-use materials

www.ca-ilg.org





- Today's Purpose:
To develop your capacity
to design and implement
public engagement
processes that are:
- informative
 - inclusive
 - influential

 INSTITUTE FOR
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Basics of Public Engagement (PE) Success



- Clarify your public engagement purposes
- Identify who you want to reach and involve
- Choose the PE approaches that best fit your purposes and participation goals

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Common purposes for PE

- Public Information
- Public Consultation
- Public Deliberation
- Sustained Public Problem Solving



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Inform



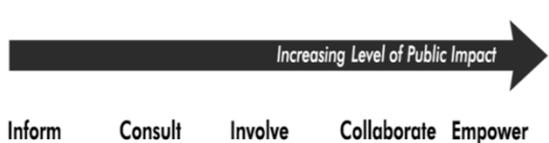
Consult



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IAP2 Spectrum of Public Engagement



www.iap2.org

www.ca-ilg.org



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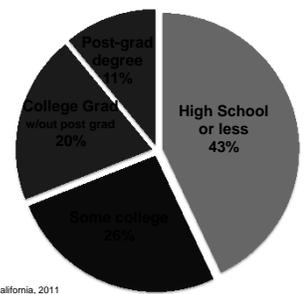
Public Meetings and Public Engagement

Public Outreach Myths

- Information alone changes citizen behavior
- “All residents” is a target audience
- Our job is done when we inform people of a public hearing or public meeting
- Testimony representing different viewpoints is a good public conversation
- If they don't show up, they must be satisfied or don't care

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CA Education Level



Source: Portrait of California, 2011

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Working from Reality

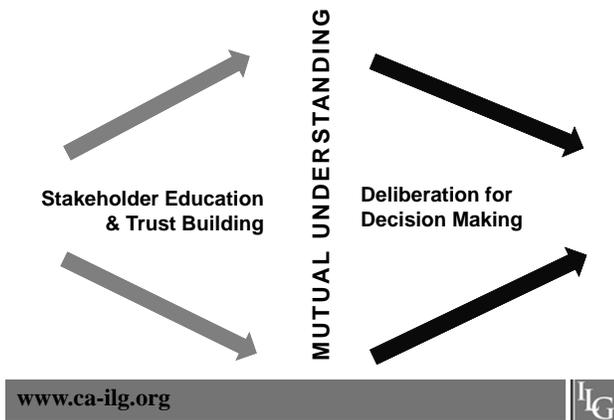


- Only a narrow slice of your county is ready or interested in attending Supervisors meetings
- The language and process of government decision-making is arcane to most people
- Extra effort is required to make the issues accessible to a broad audience
- Traditional public meeting formats can exacerbate divisions; thoughtful preparation can make them more useful for all involved

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Public Meetings and Public Engagement



Planning Questions

- Is it the right timing?
 - Educate/engage well before decision time
- Is the issue framed for public engagement?
 - Values and interests versus policy specifics
- Do you have partners to expand reach?
 - Trusted messengers make connections

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More Planning Questions

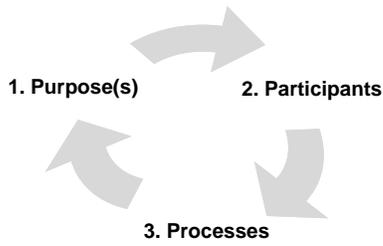
- How will public input be captured and used?
 - Offer multiple ways to be heard
- Will the process deal with real concerns?
 - The right process can help surface concerns constructively
 - Do not rush to eliminate emotion
- How will you “circle back” with the public?
 - Provide an ongoing information source

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Public Meetings and Public Engagement

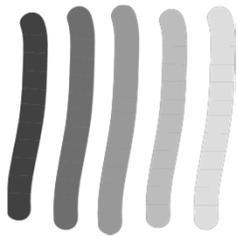
Strategic Public Engagement



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Reaching Beyond the Usual Suspects

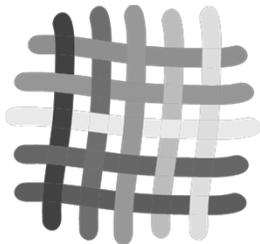


Advocates and Service Providers

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Beyond the Usual Suspects



Adding the untapped community

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New Supervisors Institute

Public Meetings and Public Engagement

Reaching Beyond the Usual Suspects



- Strategic Partners
- “Key connectors” to community networks
- Go where people are; flexible formats
- Honor life experience vs. policy knowledge
- Provide basic information about the issue, roles and scope of available actions
- Follow up and stay in touch

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Reaching Beyond the Usual Suspects



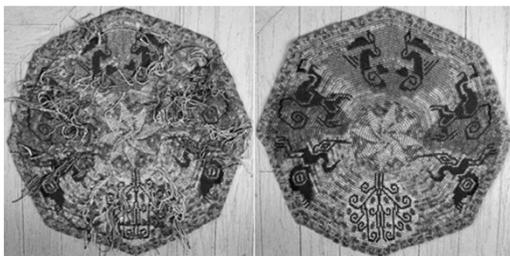
Group Discussion:

- What has worked well for you?
- What hasn't worked as well?

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Community “Weaving”



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Why Engage the Public?

Cities and counties 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. These include the following potential outcomes.

- **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 city or county 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, city, or county 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 re-occur repeatedly 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, cities and counties. 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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The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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Planning Public Engagement: Key Questions for Local Officials

Cities and counties benefit from appropriate and successful engagement of the public. For instance, local agencies improve their 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. (Also see *Why Engage the Public* www.ca-ilg.org/WhyEngage.)

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?** Is there a need for a consultant or consulting firm to take on designated public engagement design and/or delivery responsibilities? See www.ca-ilg.org/PEconsultanttips.
- 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?** There are dozens, even hundreds, of public engagement models and approaches. However, planning for such 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 need a snapshot of public opinion? Do you want a deeper sense of what the public values, a collective vision of the future, or a detailed plan or design? Is less contention and greater consensus your goal? Or is it greater public support for decisions that are made? Different public engagement approaches will likely result in more or less of each of these (or other) possible outcomes. 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. See www.ca-ilg.org/pebasics
- 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 a combination of the two.
- 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. See www.ca-ilg.org/beyondusuals and www.ca-ilg.org/inclusiveengagement.

11. Are You Tackling the Real Disagreements? The desire for common understanding and agreement can be so strong that real differences are never truly addressed in a public engagement process. Especially when your goal is broader and more specific agreement, and greater public support for the decisions to be made, superficial or vague talk, and a hesitancy to confront real conflicts (due to fear or desire for civility), can leave important differences unresolved and prevent any real movement towards consensus.

12. 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. But 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.

13. Will You "Close the Circle" with Participants and the Community? How will public engagement process participants and other residents know how the recommendations that resulted from these processes were considered and used by local decision makers?

14. 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. Also see www.ca-ilg.org/measuringPEsuccess.

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The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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Beyond the Usuals: Ideas to Encourage Broader Public Engagement in Community Decision-making

Given the challenges facing cities and counties in California, local officials are increasingly asking residents to participate in public engagement efforts whose outcomes will help shape the future of their communities. These discussions are about land use, budgeting, affordable housing, climate change, transportation, public safety, and many other local and regional issues.

However even with the best of intentions to encourage broad participation, city and county officials often find that only a relatively small number of community members actually take part in public conversations and forums intended to inform and shape local decision-making.

A failure to involve a generally representative cross-section of residents limits the effectiveness of these public engagement efforts and negatively impacts the breadth and quality of ideas contributed. It can also reduce the support that the final decisions receive in the community.

Most California communities have diverse populations and some have experienced rapid demographic changes. Residents vary by age, gender, ethnicity, immigrant status, and income level. Some own homes and some rent. Community members may be long-time residents or new arrivals. People read and speak English with different degrees of proficiency. Some have disabilities. Individual residents, as well as whole communities, may have more or less experience, confidence, or capacity to participate in public life.

Based on the ideas of many individuals and organizations, and on the experiences of communities throughout California, here are a number of ideas for achieving broader representation in local public engagement efforts. Please see www.ca-ilg.org/engagement for more information.

- **BUILD COMMUNITY CAPACITY TO PARTICIPATE** – Before specific issues are on the table, help develop the knowledge and capacity of less involved communities to better understand issues and to take part in public engagement opportunities. The development of citizen or leadership “academies” that are targeted to specific communities, and offered in translation, is one way to help accomplish this goal.
- **DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS** – The perceptions of less involved communities about the commitment of local officials to truly want their

engagement can be critical. Personal relationships developed by elected officials and local agency staff with community, leadership and advocacy organizations will reap many rewards.

- **FIT YOUR PROCESS TO THE PARTICIPANTS** – Once you determine the *purpose* of a public engagement process, think about the range of *participants* you hope to involve *before* selecting your approach or *process(es)* for that involvement. This will help you create opportunities for participation that will be more appropriate and welcoming for participants and successful in reaching the broadest diversity of your residents.
- **GET HELP** – Identify and seek the help and advice of community-based and intermediary organizations, including neighborhood and grassroots leadership groups, local clergy, faith-based organizations, community and ethnic media, and others that can as provide two-way conduits for communication between local officials and community residents on specific issues and policies.
- **COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY AND RESPECTFULLY** – Stay current with your communities changing demographics, and develop in culturally and linguistically appropriate communications material and strategies. Recognize the importance of communicating with residents in their first language to ensure their maximum understanding of issues. As appropriate, promote public engagement through ethnic media and other intermediary organizations that already serve and work with the communities you wish to reach. Plan ahead for translation services. Transportation assistance and childcare (perhaps through respected intermediary organizations) can often be helpful.
- **BE FLEXIBLE** – Holding public meetings or other public engagement processes in community settings that are known and accessible to the communities you wish to reach, perhaps co-sponsored by respected intermediary organizations, can help achieve your goals for broader participation. Explore what engagement tools and processes will best meet the needs and conditions of specific populations.
- **HAVE SPECIFIC GOALS** – For public engagement efforts, take the time to create targeted goals for harder to reach communities. In general, encourage attention and learning about inclusive engagement throughout your local agency, and include public information officers in these discussions. Individual departments can develop their own outreach plans to reach specific less-engaged communities or populations.

- **STAY IN TOUCH** – As appropriate, keep up to date lists of organizations and groups concerned about given issues and keep them informed of opportunities to participate.
- **SAY THANK YOU & FOLLOW-UP** – Express your appreciation for those who do become involved. Let participants know how their input was considered and impacted decisions.
- **KEEP LEARNING** – Follow up after specific engagement efforts to determine what worked and what could be improved.
- **BUILD IT IN** – Think about this kind of inclusion beyond the occasional public engagement effort. Explore the invitation and integration of diverse community voices as a part of your overall strategy to inform and support the goals and programs of local government.

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Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and Other Challenges to Public Engagement Processes

Public engagement processes are often forums for a broad spectrum of input. In some cases, public engagement participants will have very strongly held views about:

- The topics to be discussed;
- The local (or regional) agency and officials involved; and/or
- The public engagement process itself.

Such deeply held concerns can present challenges to a local agency sponsoring or organizing a public engagement process. Addressing these concerns effectively is important as a fundamental goal of most participation efforts is to offer the opportunity for all perspectives to be heard.

Designing and facilitating a discussion among people who have significantly different perspectives and deep feelings about an issue is both a skill and an art. The following ideas can help in designing and preparing for public engagement processes that are effective, responsive and civil - even when participants hold very strong views. Of course, local and regional agency public engagement plans and responses will be contingent on the time, staff and financial resources available.

Public Engagement Challenges

Differences of opinion about land use plans, budgets, employee pensions, public safety, sustainability, transportation options, affordable housing and other topics can generate strongly held concerns and emotions by community residents and groups. At times, local agencies and officials may themselves be an “issue” in public discussions.

A public engagement process itself can also be the subject of challenge and debate. This may be due to a local or regional agency’s approach to involving the community. It can also result from fundamentally different conceptions about the appropriate role of local government in certain issues or policy areas.

Know Your Likely Participants

As part of the public engagement planning process, try to anticipate and understand:

1. Participants’ likely concerns and interests.
2. Gaps in the information they are likely to have about the topic to be discussed.

For example, one issue that has surfaced in some public engagement processes relating to regional sustainable communities strategies is the belief that regional transportation efforts are linked to Agenda 21, a 1992 United Nations report. Searching online for “Agenda 21 + Planning” can provide more insight on this perspective.¹

In terms of public engagement process design, it is helpful to know if public engagement participants are likely to be organized stakeholders and interest groups with strongly held views, and/or members of the general public who may have less strongly formed, or more varied opinions. In addition:

- Talk with colleagues at other local and regional agencies about their experiences with challenges to - and strong public sentiments during - public engagement activities. Learn what surfaced in their processes. Ask which engagement-related approaches worked and which did not.
- Consider the likely range of participant goals in attending the planned public engagement meeting. Some participants will welcome opportunities for dialogue and deliberation with their neighbors. Others may primarily want the opportunity to: 1) ask questions; 2) make their views known; and/or 3) raise objections to the public engagement or planning process itself.

Plan, Prepare, and Provide Information

Meetings that involve individuals and groups with very different and deeply held perspectives on the issues, on the role of government, and on public engagement itself, require careful planning:

- Assess the option to identify and meet early in the design process with groups and organizations likely to have strongly held views. This may help the planning agency to better understand these views and concerns and to solicit input on process design that will enable all participants to be heard. In some cases, forming a public engagement advisory committee may be helpful.
- When possible, plan and hold selected public engagement activities in partnership with groups and organizations that have earned the community’s respect.
- As appropriate, offer opportunities for early input into the matters under consideration as this demonstrates a commitment to seeking public views.
- Try to ensure that participants adequately reflect the diverse population and viewpoints of the affected community. This requires up front efforts to encourage such participation.²
- Be especially clear in all communications about public engagement meeting purposes and processes, as well as about when, how and by whom final decisions will be made.

- As possible, provide appropriate background information to participants before and at the public engagement meeting to help prepare for informed participation.
- Identify and use impartial meeting facilitators and leaders who will not have, or be perceived as having a bias in seeing a certain perspective prevail. This may encourage greater trust in the process and broader participation.
- When using speakers to introduce issues and provide perspectives on topics to be discussed by participants, present a broad spectrum of views.
- Prepare staff and facilitators to be comfortable with strongly expressed opinions and confrontational behavior. Provide staff and facilitators with possible options and responses should participants challenge meeting ground rules, process and/or content. Facilitators should be courteous even if challenged and flexible as circumstances require.
- If concerns arise about potential safety and security issues at a meeting, staff and facilitators should know who will make decisions about any agenda changes or whether a participant should be asked to leave. Bear in mind that the visible presence of law enforcement personnel may in some cases discourage full participation or further escalate tensions.

Design an Appropriate Process

Various public engagement process designs support and/or allow opportunities for different kinds of public input.³ Some meeting design elements are particularly important when issues are significantly controversial and contested. Consider the following ideas:

- Design processes that attempt to meet the reasonable participation needs of those likely to attend. This may suggest agendas that include time for questions and answers, and periods for individual comments, as well as for small group discussion and collective discussions and recommendations. However, be *very* realistic about the time you need if you pursue such multi-faceted approaches. Sometimes separate and/or serial public engagement activities may be called for. In some cases, an earlier meeting that allows for more individual comments, questions and answers, can be followed by a meeting (or meetings) with opportunities for more collective scenario discussions and planning.
- If your goal is to try to find common ground across very deeply held and strongly felt differences, the process or processes you choose must be designed for that purpose. Typically this will require: buy-in from key stakeholders about the process and its purpose; good and accepted ground rules; competent and trusted facilitation; attention to relationship building among participants; and multiple meetings with opportunities for frank dialogue and deliberation. Attention to ensuring the participation of residents who reflect the various views about the topic in the community is an important consideration.

- Frame and publicize the *purpose* of the public engagement meeting/activity in a way that clarifies your goals, the information you plan to share, and the sort of public knowledge you are seeking to help inform and craft the policy, plan or action under consideration.
- Allow enough time in the agenda to clearly explain the work to be done at the meeting and to present an overview of the overall decision-making process, the participating agencies' roles and responsibilities, and the value and use of public input and ideas.
- Present issues and scenarios to be discussed in ways that acknowledge underlying policy history and assumptions.
- Be careful of presenting a closed set of predetermined scenarios or choices to participants. It is generally best, depending of course on time factors and where a particular engagement activity fits into an overall public participation process, to give participants the opportunity to identify other options or to express a “none of the above” preference. If the scenarios presented are the result of previous public engagement efforts, make that clear.
- Provide sources and background when presenting data and other information to the public so people can verify it for themselves if they choose.
- At times, and when possible and appropriate, it can be useful to bypass the most difficult and controversial issue divisions and define a related question for public engagement that focuses on a more do-able piece of work as a starting point. Success here may lead to a public confidence and commitment to address the larger issues.
- Consider including options for online discussion and input in the overall public engagement strategy. This allows additional choices for participation and may help secure a broader range of perspectives from the community.
- Create participant worksheets that allow public engagement meeting attendees to offer more detailed individual comments and ideas.
- If the agenda includes an opportunity for public comment and a large number of participants are expected, consider limiting the comment time allowed for each individual so that all can be heard. In some cases, key questions may be identified in small groups and then asked in the larger group.
- Determine how any collected comments, discussion elements or recommendations will be recorded and documented, and where and when they will be available.

Manage Public Engagement Meetings Transparently

At the public engagement meeting be clear about the activity's purpose and the ground rules. Maintain a respectful, impartial and firm tone and manner. Stay flexible to meet unexpected challenges. Consider the following ideas:

- Early in the meeting, briefly describe the overall agency decision-making process, the various opportunities for public input, the goal of the meeting, and how the input will be used. This should include the roles and responsibilities for ultimate decision-making, implementation and/or action by the local or regional agencies involved.
- Explain, as appropriate, the roles of others at the meeting including local or other public officials or agency staff, presenters, facilitators, media, etc.
- Describe the meeting ground rules and the values and behaviors they are intended to promote (such as respect and fairness). Ask participants to agree to observe the ground rules. If someone objects or refuses to agree, ask if the rest of the group agrees. If there is substantial objection or confusion, further discussion may be required. If one or two people out of a large group raise concerns, these should also be addressed. However, if no closure can be achieved in a few minutes, state that the ground rules accepted by most meeting attendees will be in effect and all are asked to follow them. It will then be the meeting organizers' responsibility to determine which, if any, ground rule "violations" that occur need to be identified; this may result in someone being asked to not participate or to leave.
- If participants will be asked to sign in or identify themselves before speaking, explain the purpose this serves for both speakers and listeners alike.
- For question or comment periods, indicate whether participants will be called upon directly or asked to submit question/comment cards. Some individuals may object to the use of comment cards, believing their contributions will not be as effective if they are grouped with others' or expressed by someone other than themselves.
- Acknowledge that there are likely to be disagreements. Encourage participants to practice active listening to ensure that people feel heard. Active listening techniques include repeating what one has heard, asking for clarification, avoiding the use of accusatory language and refraining from questioning someone's motives or integrity.

Respond Appropriately to Negative, Challenging or Emotionally Presented Comments

Some discussions may become loud and passionate. Rude or insulting comments may be made. Some participants may challenge the public engagement process or the overarching decision making process of the local agency. These are each quite different things. It is important to listen carefully, use good judgment and respond specifically to what is being said. For example:

- Encourage and practice active listening. Be respectful. Do not respond in kind to derogatory or insulting comments.
- Identify and respond to the substance of the question or comment rather than to its tone (assuming the question or comment is relevant to the topic).
- As appropriate, ask the person making a challenging comment to explain their point more fully. If a factual assertion is made, ask for the source of their information. Encourage everyone to draw connections between their comments and the policy issues at hand.
- If some of the participants object to moving from a large group format to small group discussions, you may suggest that those who wish to do so should move to the small group discussions as planned, and that a facilitator or staff will work with those remaining to craft a process that will meet their needs.
- Intervene if personal verbal attacks are made by one participant to another. Refer back to the ground rules and ask that such comments not be made or repeated. If a meeting leader or facilitator is individually verbally attacked, they should not respond in kind but should refer to the ground rules. Ask the speaker to reframe the question or comment in a way that focuses on the policy issues at hand.
- Suggest a short break and, as appropriate, speak to an individual about his or her inappropriate language or interactions with others.
- Be aware that people who do not feel heard are likely to speak loudest. Some individuals also use more direct or emotional styles of verbal and nonverbal expression than others.
- To the degree that's realistic, try to steer the conversation away from terms that may mean very different things to different people, such as "sustainability," "liberty," "property rights" or "economic justice."

Take Steps if Participant Behavior is Disruptive

While rare, if one or more participants' behavior become continually and personally insulting or disruptive it is important to acknowledge and address it appropriately. Otherwise the meeting may well deteriorate and decrease the chances of accomplishing the meeting's purpose. Clearly establish in advance which individuals are responsible for taking such action, and communicate this to meeting sponsors, leaders and facilitators.

If insults, disruptive behavior, or challenges to the meeting continue to occur, consider the following ideas:

- Review and enforce the meeting ground rules.
- Have the meeting facilitator maintain control of the microphone(s).
- In some cases, ask the group whether they wish the meeting to continue as planned or move to another format or process. However, this can be difficult and usually unwise in an already polarized or increasingly out-of-control meeting.
- If a “back-up” engagement process has been planned, move to it if appropriate and explain to participants what will happen next.
- If some participants continue to shout, talk over others, or disrupt the meeting:
 - Indicate that they will be asked to leave if the disorderly behavior continues; and take that step if called for; and/or
 - Conclude the meeting.

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 and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on public engagement and sustainable communities, visit www.ca-ilg.org/engagement and www.ca-ilg.org/sustainability. To access this resource directly, go to www.ca-ilg.org/DeeplyHeldConcerns.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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¹ See *Agenda 21: Myths and Facts* from the American Planning Association (www.smartvalleyplaces.org/wp-content/uploads/Agenda21mythsfacts.pdf).

² See www.ca-ilg.org/inclusiveengagement.

³ See www.ca-ilg.org/PEbasics.

New Supervisors Institute Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and Organized Opposition in Public Engagement Activities

Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and Organized Opposition in Public Engagement Activities

Highlights from
March 13, 2013
Webinar

www.ca-ilg.org/webinarbasics





Purpose: To develop your capacity to design and implement public engagement processes with the greatest chance of success when there are strongly contested views and values.



Participants May Have Strongly Held Views About:



- The topics to be discussed
- The local agency and officials involved and/or
- The planning and/or public engagement process(es)

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Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and Organized Opposition in Public Engagement Activities

Think About Your Likely Participants



- What are their possible concerns and interests?
- Are there assumptions/gaps in information?
- What are their past experiences in other settings?
- How may they view an opportunity for public engagement?

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Plan, Prepare, and Provide Information



- Offer opportunities for early process input and co-sponsorship
- Strive for speakers and participants to reflect diverse population & viewpoints
- Endure sponsor and facilitator clarity about meeting process & strategy
- Plan for/prepare impartial mtg. facilitators
- Prepare for “What if...”

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Design an Appropriate Process



- Provide info & opportunities for learning to address information gaps
- Cover underlying “policy” history and scope of jurisdiction’s role/possible actions
- Offer multiple ways for public to ask questions and share comments (before, during and after)
- Consider processes that identify areas of common ground – but allow adequate time
- Use “pre-meetings” if needed

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Manage Public Engagement Meetings Transparently



- Describe meeting goals, process, documentation, and what happens next
- Establish meeting ground rules (or “courtesy guidelines”)
- Clarify how questions and/or comments will be handled – and comments documented
- Allow “none of the above” responses
- Show respect, impartiality & good listening

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Responding to Negative, Challenging or Emotionally Presented Comments



- Remain calm and actively listen; respond to the substance of the comment rather than to its tone
- Intervene if personal verbal attacks are made (refer back to guidelines)
- People who don’t feel heard tend to speak loudest (if needed, they can share extra comments w/ staff)
- Maintain control of the microphone
- Know when to move to “back-up” plan

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Summary



- Think about your likely participants
- Ensure clarity among sponsors/facilitator
- Inform and include
- Practice transparency
- Fit the process to the participants
- Prepare for “what if...”

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Resources



- Webinar link: www.ca-ilg.org/webinarbasics
- Resources and case stories about public engagement strategies to address difficult issues and situations
www.ca-ilg.org/difficult-situations-public-engagement
- Resources to promote civility in public discourse
www.ca-ilg.org/document/promoting-civility-public-discourse
- Strategies to deal with emotional audiences
www.ca-ilg.org/document/dealing-emotional-audiences

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