

Engaging the Public in Economic Development



The loss of redevelopment agencies coupled with a downturn in the economy has left many cities and counties seeking new ways to approach local economic development. One essential economic development tool that may often be underused is *public engagement* – involving community members in charting a path to shared prosperity and an improved quality of life. Engaging the public in an authentic and practical way can help develop a shared understanding of local economic development policies and programs, increasing their potential effectiveness and impact over time. Understanding the unique conditions within one’s jurisdiction

and how they affect diverse community sectors can support short- and long-term priorities in a way that encourages economic competitiveness and improves fiscal health.

Because local challenges and opportunities are as varied as individual communities, engaging the public can help ensure that the economic development strategy aligns with the community’s needs. Engaging the public in local economic development can help build support for the adoption and implementation of future initiatives.

There are no “silver bullets.” Economic development is often an elusive and difficult challenge for communities because it relies on a large number of interrelated factors. Physical infrastructure, human capital and entrepreneurial support networks all play a part to determining the overall economic health of a city. Public engagement provides opportunities to improve each of these areas using the collective wisdom and insight of the residents who will be most directly affected by the success or failure of any economic development plan.

For more information, see www.ca-ilg.org/basics-public-engagement

Key Considerations When Planning Your Engagement Approach

Why Are We Doing This?

Before deciding to engage the public in economic development strategy or activities, it is important to clearly define the goals and desired results of the public engagement effort. Consulting with relevant industry and community leaders about the purposes and components of a public engagement strategy can be helpful. An assessment of your community's business, transportation, nonprofit, health and educational partners may provide a good place to start.

How Do We Get There?

Regardless of the public engagement approach selected, it is important to note the primary purpose of the engagement effort is to help identify and shape economic development strategies and actions, rather than to persuade residents to accept a formulated plan. It is important for the public to both feel as if they have significant opportunities to modify the plan through their input and that they actually have such opportunities.

Methods to engage the public include asset mapping, community visioning and collaborative workshops. Other approaches include incorporating economic development planning into other required efforts or partnering with other organizations within the development community. Digital engagement choices are also plentiful. For more information see ILG's [Technology and Public Engagement resources](#).

Customize Outreach

Remember to utilize multiple communications formats or processes that will suit the participants' needs. This may include online as well as face-to-face activities. Such processes should encourage authentic participation in ways that are effective, equitable and consistent with the overall goals of the economic development public engagement process. Also consider how participants can learn about the issues and stay in touch before, during and after the effort. For more information see ILG's [Effective Public Engagement Through Strategic Communication](#).

What do Residents Need to Know?

Many residents may have a clear idea about what they want in their community, but as economic development professionals know, achieving some goals is much easier said than done. Provide public engagement participants the information or access to expertise that is necessary to help elicit informed input is important. This does not mean that each participant has to be an economic development expert, but it is important to set expectations appropriately.

Who Should Be Involved?

Including a diverse cross-section of the community strengthens any public engagement process. Consider involving community leaders from neighborhood organizations, clergy and congregations, industry, nonprofit and academic institutions that broadly reflect of the population of residents. Consider including representatives of varying ages, ethnicities and socio-economic statuses.

After identifying who to engage, the next step is to identify how and where to engage them. Consider language barriers, capacity, location and timeline. Time spent on these questions are more likely to produce successful public engagement outcomes later. For more information see ILG's [resources on partnering with community based organizations](#).

What is the Cost?

Consider how much time, staffing and other resources can be dedicated to the effort. Consensus-based recommendations and/or having to work through complex and contentious discussions often require more preparation, implementation time and skilled facilitation. Recommendations that require 100 percent agreement can be difficult to achieve. However, if resources are limited, engaging in a respectful dialogue that ensures everyone's views are heard can help build trust and understanding. If use of an outside facilitator is desired, be sure the timeline accommodates the contracting process.

Strategies and Stories

Agencies throughout the state are using a variety of strategies to gain public input to inform the economic development initiatives in their community. This section presents four examples.

1. Asset mapping is an inventory of the businesses, organizations and institutions that help create a community. At its most basic level, the asset mapping process will provide leaders with an inventory of key resources and partners that can be used in an economic development effort. A more comprehensive asset mapping initiative will provide a deep understanding of the key networks and cultural attitudes that shape the regional economy, indicate “gap” areas that require further investment and provide a baseline by which to judge future progress toward prosperity. Asset mapping was a key component in helping the Sacramento Valley region locate the social, material and financial assets in its community. This provided a local network of resources to target when seeking a broader base of support and partnership to help boost the sluggish economy.

The Sacramento Valley's Vision



The recession hit the Sacramento region hard. In addition to business bankruptcies and home foreclosures, over 140,000 jobs were lost and unemployment was over 12 percent. In response, business leaders spearheaded an effort to bring elected officials, nonprofits, educational institutions and labor groups together to help develop a comprehensive plan aimed at accelerating job creation and new investment in California's capital region.

The 18-month collaborative effort included a series of engagement techniques, including asset mapping, that resulted in The Capital Region Prosperity Plan, which was officially adopted by five counties, 15 cities and two workforce investment boards as their “economic game plan.” Asset mapping helped Valley Vision, a Sacramento-based nonprofit, identify the community members who needed to be involved.

The plan was approved as a regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), which allows Valley Vision to access federal funds from the U.S. Department of Commerce. Organizers of the plan are working with funders to financially reward stakeholders that advance the principles and goals associated with the plan.

Special software is being created to track and rate the progress on the plan's 270 tactics. An oversight committee of regional business and economic development organizations will ensure the plan is implemented over the next five years. For more information visit <http://valleyvision.org/projects/next-economy>.

Strategies and Stories

2. Community visioning is the process of developing a consensus about what future the community wants and then deciding what is necessary to achieve it. Community visioning is typically crafted through a collaborative process that involves a wide variety of community residents, stakeholders and elected officials coming together to identify common community goals, values and strategies. As illustrated in the North Coast Prosperity story below, community visioning involves early and continuous public involvement in the process. It encourages the full participation of all community members in goal development, action planning and implementation to create a roadmap of collaborative action for achieving the region's desired economic development outcomes.

North Coast Prosperity



In an effort to create a comprehensive economic development strategy for the region, Humboldt County formed partnerships with several economic-focused organizations to help engage more than 450 stakeholders, ranging from business owners and elected officials to community members, education professionals and tribal leaders.

The project spanned three years and was implemented in three phases to maximize participation and results. Starting the process with industry leader discussions and an industry leader council to review and prioritize ideas from a business perspective was critical to building credibility. In phase two, the leaders engaged residents, business/civic leaders and economic development professionals through individual interviews to help identify 18 different topics on which to engage the community at large.

The North Coast Prosperity Network team then invited the community to attend a launch party for the initiative. The 130 attendees were asked to join one of 18 citizen action teams designed to discuss the identified topics and prioritize economic challenges. Feedback from residents showed that people preferred smaller group discussions and found them more productive than larger forums. Throughout the process, the organizers asked for feedback on the process and plan to ensure that the community input was understood and represented correctly. The extensive public engagement effort not only resulted in a comprehensive report that outlines the region's greatest economic opportunities, but also helped members of the community better understand their roles in improving the local economy. For more information visit <http://www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement-case-stories/humboldt-county-engages-public-inform-its-economic-development>.

Strategies and Stories

3. Incorporate into existing required efforts. Updates and revisions to General Plans, Specific Plans or other land use planning and zoning provisions are a valuable avenue for actively engaging the public in economic development decisions. General Plans and other land use and development plans and policies are key components of a community’s economic development potential, as these items influence decisions to attract, retain and expand local businesses and employment opportunities. In addition to the more formal public hearing process, a variety of public participation strategies can be used to broaden and strengthen the involvement and commitment of local residents and stakeholders in developing and carrying out these plans and strategies. In Fresno, the General Plan update process in 2011 offered an opportunity to engage the public in developing such a strategy and to restore a sense of community, fiscal responsibility and economic vitality. Engage the public in developing such a strategy and to restore a sense of community, fiscal responsibility and economic vitality.

Fresno



With areas of significant poverty and a pattern of urban sprawl, the City of Fresno saw a critical need to develop a new strategy to guide future development. The General Plan update process represented an ideal opportunity to engage the public in developing a strategy to address broad community needs, restore economic vitality and a sense of pride and community.

The city looked to its community partners, such as the Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries and the West Fresno Family Resource Center, for help in reaching and engaging residents who had limited prior experience with city government and its planning process. Many of these organizational partners knew one another well and were accustomed to collaborating. These long-term partnerships helped to overcome immigrant residents’ resistance and mistrust based on their experiences with government in their countries of origin.

To begin the process, the community organizations used two universal languages: food and art. Creating a festival-type spirit was not only important for relationship building through one-on-one conversations, but also to slowly introduce city planning and policies in a way that was relevant to many cultures. The city and its partners set the stage by framing the conversation in terms of community values rather than city policies. In developing the outreach program, they asked, “How do we help people feel that ‘this process matters to me, my family and my neighborhood’?”

Fresno invited conversation through its partner organizations to create a truly collaborative process with the community’s diverse residents. Initial community meetings and listening sessions successfully brought hundreds of people into the planning process to share their neighborhood priorities first-hand and help shape planning for the future. For more information visit www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement-case-story/community-partners-help-city-fresno-shape-its-general-plan-update.

Strategies and Stories

4. Collaborate or Partner. Regional collaborations and partnerships are being implemented to address economic and societal challenges that are too large or complex to be solved by any single organization. Regional collaborations between the business, government, nonprofit and philanthropy sectors can lead to an increase in opportunities and resources. Several communities, including those in the San Francisco East Bay Area, have been successful in utilizing partnerships to foster economic development in the region.

East Bay Regional Collaboration



In a post-redevelopment world, competition can be fierce. While competition between neighboring cities and counties can spark activity, avoiding destructive competition that pits communities against one another can make it easier for cities to improve their fiscal bottom line.

A diverse group of cities and partners in the East Bay is showing that cooperation and collaboration among neighboring communities and the business sector can pay big dividends in new jobs that enhances economic development for all. The East Bay Economic Development Alliance (East Bay

ADA) is a public-private partnership representing the cities in Alameda and Contra Costa counties as well as businesses, universities and community colleges and community groups.

The membership-based group convenes on a regular basis to share information and strategies that advance regional interests. The East Bay ADA develops marketing materials and strategic relationships to attract and retain businesses and to promote workforce development programs. Through this collaboration, city leaders learn about potential opportunities and contribute to the future economic competitiveness of the region.

This coordinated economic development partnership is creating a culture of stewardship, innovation and action that is leading to prosperity and economic gains and benefitting the region's residents — regardless of in which city they happen to live, work or play. For more information visit www.westerncity.com/Western-City/May-2013/Collaboration-Promotes-Economic-Development/.

Lessons Learned From Successful Efforts

Collaboration

Collaboration Pays Off. Public engagement efforts may carry significant costs of time, staffing and financial resources, so it can be beneficial to leverage funding and resources from several parties. Identify opportunities where the city, county or region would benefit from multiple organizations collaborating to pool existing resources or seek additional funding as a group.

Transparency

Transparency is Paramount. It is important to provide detailed information about the process and how the participants' input will be incorporated into the final strategy or plan. In addition, providing continuous feedback throughout the process improves continued participation and helps develop a plan that will more closely represent the input given.

Background

Provide Background. Engaging those who have not traditionally been involved in economic development discussions can provide keen insights related to the values and desired direction for their community. However, in some cases, members of the public may need additional facts or information to enable them to provide informed input on a conversation related to economic development plan or strategy that is based in reality.

Authenticity

Be Authentic and Inclusive. A shared understanding of the region's challenges and opportunities by diverse stakeholders will not only bring new perspectives, but may also help increase the likelihood that potential economic benefits will be distributed across more community members. Authentic engagement may also serve as a foundation for future public-private partnerships that can help catalyze economic growth and increase trust and cooperation in other future planning efforts.

Ownership

Seek Ownership, as well as Input. Engaging stakeholders in the implementation as well as the development of an economic strategy or policy can help ensure success. In To maintain momentum after a plan is created, it is best to prioritize issues and secure specific commitments to promote a strategy that is truly owned across sectors.

Prosperity

It's Not Just About Jobs. A typical way of measuring the success of economic development is by the number of jobs created or tax dollars increased. These are important indicators but can provide a narrow understanding of results. Quality-of-life indicators and per-capita income also provide a picture of how economic development efforts lead to increased prosperity. Understanding the wide range of factors that influence residents' economic well-being can offer a way to think more strategically about economic development and the potential for greater success.

Additional Resources

Further information is available through these resources on the ILG website at www.ca-ilg.org.

[Why Engage the Public?](#)

[Planning Public Engagement: Key Questions for Local Officials](#)

[Working Effectively with Public Engagement Consultants: Tips for Local Officials](#)

[Broadening Public Participation Using Online Engagement Tools](#)

Other helpful resources include:

[Catalyzing Regional Economic Transformation: Lessons from Funder Collaboration in Northeast Ohio, October 2013.](#)

[Just Growth: Inclusion and Posterity in America's Metropolitan Regions](#), Benner and Pastor, Routledge, 2012.

Video, Chris Benner: [The Power of Just Growth](#)

While not directly concerned with local or regional economic development, the following may foster out-of-the-box thinking:

[Communities of Opportunity: A Framework for a More Equitable and Sustainable Future for All. See Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity](#); Ohio State University.

[Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach](#), Martha C. Nussbaum, Harvard University Press, 2011.



[Engaging the Public in Economic Development](http://www.ca-ilg.org/EngagingPublicEconomicDevelopment) www.ca-ilg.org/EngagingPublicEconomicDevelopment

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:

- » Local Government Basics
- » Public Engagement
- » Sustainable Communities
- » Ethics and Transparency
- » Collaboration and Partnerships

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