

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, local officials often find that only a relatively small number of community members actually take part in public conversations and forums.

A failure to involve a 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 community support for the final decisions.

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.

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.


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DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS

Less engaged communities are often critical of the public engagement process. Developing personal relationships with the community can lead to a more inclusive process and community buy-in.

BUILD COMMUNITY CAPACITY TO PARTICIPATE

Community members have varying degrees of familiarity with local government processes and functions. Providing educational materials or process at the beginning of the public engagement process will allow more meaningful participation from the broad community.

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 reach the diversity community.

GET HELP

Identify and consult 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 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

Hold public meetings or other public engagement processes in community settings that are known and accessible to the communities you wish to reach. Explore what engagement tools and processes will best meet the needs and conditions of specific populations.

HAVE SPECIFIC GOALS

Take the time to create targeted goals for harder to reach communities. In general, encourage attention and learning about inclusive engagement throughout your 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 current 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

Explore the integration of diverse community voices as a part of your overall strategy to inform and support the goals and programs of local government.

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/public-engagement.

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