

# INVOLVING THE PUBLIC IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION

by Terry Amsler

Civic participation is receiving a great deal of attention from municipal policymakers who want to get more people involved in the local decision-making process – particularly the planning process. Why should decision makers seek the public’s involvement? Judith Innes and David Booher, authors of *Reframing Public Participation: Strategies for the 21st Century*, identified five answers to this question:

1. Local officials can better identify the public’s preferences through engagement strategies and include this information in their decision-making;
2. Decision-making can be improved by incorporating resident’s local knowledge;
3. Broader public involvement advances fairness and justice, especially when people who are typically less involved and less advantaged and who may face great obstacles to having a public voice are given the opportunity and capacity to participate;
4. Public participation typically results in decisions that have greater legitimacy; and
5. The law may require that the public be engaged.

The Local Government Commission, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, has suggested additional practical benefits for public involvement in planning:

- Good plans are more likely to remain intact over time if they have developed supportive public constituencies generated through direct participation;
- A proactive public involvement process reduces the potential for ongoing disputes among stakeholders and



contentious battles before city councils and planning commissions;

- Plans and projects that develop strong community buy-in through public engagement strategies may ultimately experience fewer slowdowns and associated costs; and
- Meaningful public involvement can produce an enhanced sense of community and a more general trust in government.

The benefits may be greater than better plans alone. Also at stake, claims author and planning theorist John Forester, are “issues of political membership and identity, memory and hope, confidence and competence, appreciation and respect, acknowledgement, and the ability to act together.”

Engaging the public in municipal planning is typically not an easy task, and there is no one correct way to proceed. In addition to the challenge of matching the right sort of civic participation to the particular planning requirement at hand, these efforts may draw heavily on an agency’s staff, time, and financial resources. It can be a challenge to attract a broader set of participants than those who might normally show up, and the whole process may not always turn out as well as hoped. However, if done strategically

and well, the benefits described above almost always outweigh the costs – or the risks.

When public engagement is envisioned, it’s helpful to ask the following basic questions.

*Do you have the necessary time and resources?* Engaging in a public involvement process when the decision (or a major part of it) is already made – or when it’s too late to integrate meaningful changes – will probably lead to frustration for every-

body and may reinforce mistrust in local officials. Such processes may also draw significantly on staff time and/or the use of consultants. A full civic engagement effort must be well prepared for and well managed to succeed. Take time to clarify responsibilities and start the process early.

*Is local political leadership on board?* Appropriate political leadership should agree on the engagement purpose, process, and how the public input will be used. It’s essential that staff and elected officials understand clearly the planned engagement process(es) and the role of appropriate agency staff.

*Is there history that needs attention first?* In some cases, a history of mistrust or a divisive political battle causes significant polarization in the community around planning issues, and an “airing out” process may be needed before or as part of a participatory planning effort. Existing divisiveness also may indicate that a civic engagement effort would be better developed jointly with the community, not launched by government alone.

*How will talk be linked to action?* It is important to establish clearly from the outset how public officials will use the planning ideas, recommendations, or agreements that result from public participation. This should be part of

a consistent message delivered to the public by everyone involved. Confusion here will cause trouble throughout the process.

*Will your purpose lead your process?*

Too often, civic engagement planning starts with discussion about the number of public meetings to hold and who to invite rather than grappling with the sort of information that the agency wished to have from its residents as part of the planning process. Do you want a snapshot of public opinion, a deeper sense of what the public values, collectively ranked general preferences, the community's vision of the future, the most favored design idea, specific and consensus-based plan language, more agreement on a particular controversial aspect of the plan - or a combination of these things?

Seeking collective and detailed recommendations generally requires that participants have more information, more time to address differences and grapple with alternatives, and good facilitation. Broader participation generally helps to provide a fuller picture of opinion and ideas and to secure community support for the outcome. Smaller numbers typically work better to address alternatives and trade-offs to help formulate specific plan elements. Combining both within a common engagement framework may be the best approach (depending on the nature of the planning to be done), but don't expect all possible outcomes from any single approach.

*How will participants be selected?*

There are many approaches to determining who should attend a more participatory planning process. Generally, choices include self-selection (open to all who want to attend), invitation to either groups or individuals, or a more rigorous random sampling (perhaps through random address selection or phone calls). An online component may allow for greater flexibility in any of these approaches. Each selection method has its place and one may complement another, but each also has potential drawbacks. Random sampling may get you a representative but transitory picture of community opinion. Meetings open to all may produce new voices or only those who usually participate. Inviting selected individuals or groups may encourage important stakeholders to attend or just limit the range of voices at the table.

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Local officials should determine whether the emphasis will be on the participation of organized stakeholders or members of the broader community or a combination of both. Generally, more deliberative planning processes require more balanced participation for legitimacy and to capture the full range of opinion in the community. This suggests ensuring that participants representing various populations and views are in the room, whether it's a large meeting or stakeholder oriented.

*How can you achieve greater diversity in participation?* Reaching beyond "the usual" participants requires a conscious plan, systematic efforts, and help from people who already have knowledge about and relationships with the communities and constituencies you want to include. Reach out to local media, clergy and congregations, leadership and advocacy groups, and others that serve your less involved populations. Co-sponsor participation processes with trusted local groups at their facilities. Provide language-accessible materials and activities. With other groups, create a long-term plan to help develop leadership and participation from less engaged communities. (For more ideas, see "Beyond the Usuals" at [www.ca-ilg.org/cgipubs](http://www.ca-ilg.org/cgipubs).)

*Is there a communications plan?* A process that engages dozens or even hundreds of individuals in deliberative

discussions may result in increased knowledge and consensus about a plan among those individuals. However, others also will have an opinion, and broad support may be needed for successful implementation. Develop a communications plan, inform external media, and use agency communication vehicles to let residents and others know about the process, how its going and its outcomes. This amplifies the benefits of your engagement process.

*Will you follow up with participants and the community?* Good public deliberation efforts include telling public participants how policy-makers used the recommendations that resulted from these processes. If some ideas weren't used, explaining the reason why, demonstrates respect for the participants. Celebrate completion of the process with everyone who contributed.

*How will you learn from the experience?* Using input from process participants, staff, and others take the time to review what worked and didn't work. Use this information the next time you begin a public participation process. □

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