

A 4

Citizen Engagement: An Evolving Process

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Traditionally understood as an opportunity for citizens to attend and speak at council meetings, “citizen engagement” is now understood to be a process of dialogue and action. Why do we want to engage citizens? was one of several questions posed during a presentation at the “Big Ideas Conference,” convened in October 2009 by the Alliance for Innovation. The conference brought together local government practitioners, academics, publishers, nonprofit chief executive officers, and others to discuss the major challenges and opportunities facing local governments. One theme throughout the conference was the changing relationship of local government and its citizens. “Citizen engagement” is often described as a value and an activity to be pursued, but without answering the “why,” one discussant argued, we cannot answer the “who” and the “how.” As the discussion proceeded, several reasons to engage citizens emerged:¹

- To uphold our beliefs in democratic principles: it’s the “right” thing to do.
- To provide a vehicle for individual community members to become “citizens” in the highest sense of the word.
- To develop more creative solutions to public problems, solutions that are responsive to community values and preferences.
- To avoid policy failure.

The follow-up question was, who are we trying to get to participate? In other words, who counts as a citizen? Do we define *citizen* only by legal status and exclude those who may be able to help solve neighborhood safety problems? Who are the stakeholders? Are they only those with a direct relationship to a policy? For example, if hours are going to be extended for a neighborhood teen center, are the stakeholders only the parents and their teens or are they all neighborhood residents?

The next question was, how do we make citizen engagement effective? If citizens participate in problem solving but are not confident that the local government staff listened and acted upon what they heard, the results will be ineffective. As one participant pointed out, bringing citizens

together to get them to support a particular local government policy is not engagement. The goal needs to be more than minimizing opposition. Citizen engagement is not an event; it’s a process that involves conversation.

The discussion described above suggests opportunities for further research. The questions related to citizen engagement on ICMA’s *State of the Profession 2009* survey, discussed in this article, do not begin to address all of these elements, although future surveys will undoubtedly do so. The survey responses do, however, offer a glimpse into what local governments are doing.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The *State of the Profession 2009* survey was mailed in the summer of 2009 to all city-type local governments with a population of 2,500 and above and to all counties with an appointed administrator/manager or elected executive. Local governments that did not respond to the first survey received a follow-up reminder. Overall, 26% of local governments responded (Table 4/1).

STRATEGIC PLANNING

One of the major opportunities for citizen engagement is through the strategic planning process. As the National Civic League notes on its website regarding community visioning and strategic planning, “Some communities allow the future to happen to them. Successful communities decide the future is something they can create.”² Strategic planning is taught in Master of Public Administration programs throughout the country, yet only 62% of localities report having a strategic or long-range plan (Table 4/2). Population size seems influential, with a general decrease in the percentage of local governments reporting strategic plans as population size decreases. The Mid-Atlantic local governments show the lowest percentage reporting strategic plans (39%), whereas all other geographic divisions show more than 50% reporting them. By form of government, council-manager and county council-administrator juris-

Selected Findings

Despite the importance of strategic planning, only 62% of surveyed local governments reported having a strategic or long-range plan in place. Of those, however, 50% indicated that the plan had been revised since the recession was recognized in December 2007, which indicates a willingness to address new realities.

Overall, only 29% of local governments involve citizens in decision making about the allocation of resources. Among those that do, the highest percentages are in the larger populations groups and in the New England and Pacific Coast divisions (58% and 45%, respectively).

To ensure that there is a reliable representation of public opinion beyond those citizens who attend public meetings, 51% of local governments conduct citizen surveys.

dictions show the highest percentages reporting strategic plans (67% and 58%, respectively).

Table 4/1 SURVEY RESPONSE

	No. of municipalities/ counties ¹ surveyed (A)	No. responding	
		No.	% of (A)
Total	8,548	2,214	26
Population group			
Over 1,000,000	34	7	21
500,000–1,000,000	73	17	23
250,000–499,999	116	30	26
100,000–249,999	370	105	28
50,000–99,999	627	174	28
25,000–49,999	1,061	294	28
10,000–24,999	2,152	547	25
5,000–9,999	2,006	532	27
2,500–4,999	2,084	504	24
Under 2,500	25	4	16
Geographic region			
Northeast	2,074	393	19
North-Central	2,485	707	29
South	2,692	684	25
West	1,297	430	33
Geographic division			
New England	750	161	22
Mid-Atlantic	1,324	232	18
East North-Central	1,618	402	25
West North-Central	869	305	35
South Atlantic	1,302	382	29
East South-Central	546	88	16
West South-Central	844	215	26
Mountain	502	156	31
Pacific Coast	793	273	34
Metro status			
Central	859	240	28
Suburban	4,481	1,178	26
Independent	3,208	796	25
Form of government			
Mayor-council	3,150	626	20
Council-manager	3,539	1,189	34
Commission	143	30	21
Town meeting	342	69	20
Representative town meeting	63	9	14
County council-administrator (manager)	820	224	27
County council-elected executive	491	67	14

¹For a definition of terms, please see “Inside the Year Book,” x–xii.

Table 4/2 LOCAL GOVERNMENT USE OF A STRATEGIC AND/OR LONG-RANGE PLAN

Classification	No. reporting (A)	Yes	
		No.	% of (A)
Total	2,050	1,267	62
Population group			
Over 1,000,000	6	3	50
500,000–1,000,000	17	16	94
250,000–499,999	28	24	86
100,000–249,999	100	76	76
50,000–99,999	165	122	74
25,000–49,999	275	181	66
10,000–24,999	499	319	64
5,000–9,999	499	276	55
2,500–4,999	457	249	55
Under 2,500	4	1	25
Geographic division			
New England	146	81	56
Mid-Atlantic	208	80	39
East North-Central	373	249	67
West North-Central	284	176	62
South Atlantic	368	240	65
East South-Central	78	44	56
West South-Central	194	125	64
Mountain	147	103	70
Pacific Coast	252	169	67
Metro status			
Central	223	172	77
Suburban	1,093	664	61
Independent	734	431	59
Form of government			
Mayor-council	554	310	56
Council-manager	1,125	754	67
Commission	30	15	50
Town meeting	62	34	55
Representative town meeting	9	3	33
County council-administrator (manager)	214	125	58
County council-elected executive	56	26	46

An often-heard criticism of strategic plans is that they “sit on the shelf.” Yet among the local governments that report a strategic plan, 50% indicated that the plan has been revised since the recession was recognized in December 2007 (not shown). It is important that strategic plans are understood to “represent the current state of collective thinking about what the future will be like.”⁷³ When changes occur that may affect the future, such as a major recession, the plan may need to be modified to reflect new realities.

Those local governments that indicated they had revised the strategic plan since December 2007 were asked who was involved in the revision. Although no one checked “citizens and residents,” possibly because these participants were subsumed under “citizen advisory boards and commissions” (see Figure 4/1), several respondents wrote in under “other” that the process was open to the public. Also noted under “other” were real estate professionals, auditors, planning commission members, transit groups, and other local governments. Lee’s Summit, Missouri, wrote that it has been working with the National Civic League to implement citizen-based strategic planning.

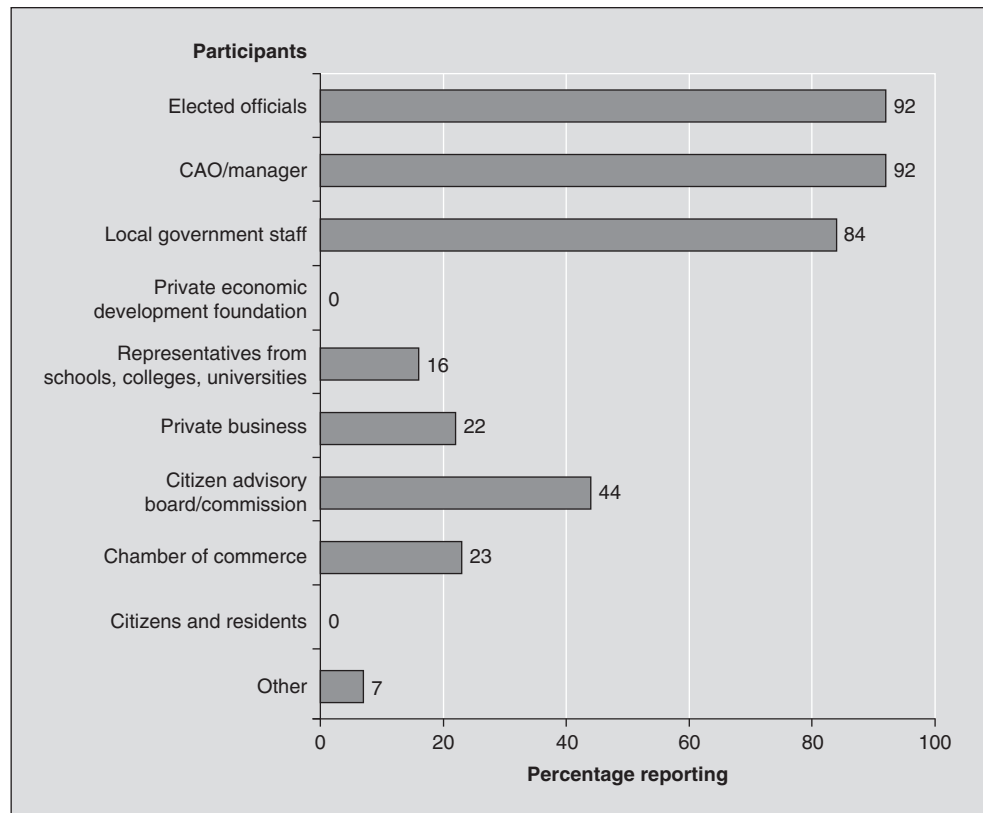


Figure 4/1 Participants in the revision of the strategic plan (n = 751)

Strategic plan implementation typically has budget implications. The actions that arise from the planning process give that process credibility. If the plan is not linked to the budget process, it suggests that there is no planned investment for implementation. In this survey, 77% of local governments reported linking the strategic plan to the budget process (not shown).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Among the 94% of respondents that reported offering opportunities for citizen engagement, there is minimal variation among population groups or geographic divisions: more than 90%

in each group reported that such opportunities exist (not shown). There is more variation by form of government, however, in that a noticeably lower percentage of respondents from cities with the commission form of government (79%) reported offering opportunities for citizen engagement.

A glitch in the survey tool prevented some respondents from identifying all the opportunities they offer citizens, but many respondents wrote in that they provide all of the opportunities listed in the survey instrument—including council meetings, town meetings, ad hoc task forces/planning teams, citizen review boards, neighborhood meetings, participation on boards or commissions, neighborhood action committees/teams, and Internet discussion forums—as well as coffee with

St. James, Minnesota, Holds “Coffee with the Mayor” Sessions

Coffee with the mayor is held from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the Community Building on the Monday preceding the second council meeting of each month. A local coffee shop provides free coffee, and the city provides freshly baked cookies. An invitation is posted on the public access television station, the city signboard (located in a downtown park), and a sandwich board in front of the community building on the day of the event, and all residents are encouraged to participate. An update is then given at the council meeting as to what was brought up at the meeting.

City Manager Joe McCabe reports that between 15 and 25 people attend the meetings, where everyone has an opportunity to comment on, question, and sometimes praise what is taking place in the city. It is an excellent way to have people express their concerns about an issue in a nonthreatening way.

Charlotte Citizens Symposium: Creating Sustainable Neighborhoods

The Charlotte city council chose the theme “Creating Sustainable Neighborhoods” because it reflects the council’s vision of a dynamic community featuring vibrant neighborhoods that attract new residents, sustain businesses, and encourage reinvestment.

Nine symposium sessions were scheduled for 2009, grouped into winter, spring, and fall terms, and each term had three meetings. During the first and second sessions of each term, participants learned about a specific city government department or program, and they used that knowledge to identify opportunities to align operations in that department or program to better address and support neighborhood sustainability. The third session of each term built upon the discussion of the preceding two sessions. Participants were joined by city council members to carry out a community-based planning, goal-setting, and policy development process. The results of these sessions are being used to guide the council as it develops its work plan for 2010 and beyond.

Participation was open to all—newcomers as well as longtime residents, ordinary citizens as well as elected or appointed officials—and there was no cost to attend. The only requirement was a sincere interest in Charlotte’s future.

Source: City of Charlotte, “Charlotte Citizens Symposium,” charlottemi.org/PDF/2009/010309-SymposiumBrochure.pdf.

the mayor; mayor’s night in, night out; public hearings; planning meetings; “contact us” on the local government Web page; and citizens’ symposia.

In addition, many local governments have citizen academies or other programs to educate community members about their local government. The city of Visalia, California, offers “Citizens in the Know,” in which council members and city staff present information on Visalia’s history, planning, public safety, and services, and on the council’s vision for the future. Often residents who attend these programs become more involved in their community.

Even when citizens are provided with opportunities to solve local problems, a lack of resources can thwart those efforts and frustrate participants. Thus, 94% of local governments reported that they provide citizens with the resources necessary to solve problems and implement decisions—

an increase over the 84% of respondents who answered affirmatively to the *State of the Profession 2006* survey. Among those who said yes in the current survey, 153 reported providing all of the resources listed in Figure 4/2, and of those, 106 are council-manager municipalities or council-administrator counties.

The current fiscal crisis has resulted in severe financial cutbacks for many local governments trying to manage significant budget shortfalls. When asked if citizens are involved in decision making related to the fiscal crisis, such as decisions about how to allocate resources, less than one-third (29%) of localities reported that they are (Table 4/3). However, there is noticeable variation by population group, geographic division, and form of government. Generally, the percentages reporting citizen involvement in allocation of resources decrease among the smaller local governments. Moreover, the local governments in

Table 4/3 CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION MAKING RELATED TO THE FISCAL CRISIS

Classification	No. reporting (A)	Yes	
		No.	% of (A)
Total	1,996	581	29
Population group			
Over 1,000,000	6	3	50
500,000–1,000,000	16	6	38
250,000–499,999	28	14	50
100,000–249,999	95	38	40
50,000–99,999	160	62	39
25,000–49,999	267	85	32
10,000–24,999	488	138	28
5,000–9,999	479	120	25
2,500–4,999	453	113	25
Under 2,500	4	2	50
Geographic division			
New England	147	86	59
Mid-Atlantic	205	48	23
East North-Central	362	89	25
West North-Central	268	63	24
South Atlantic	361	100	28
East South-Central	75	13	17
West South-Central	184	36	20
Mountain	146	35	24
Pacific Coast	248	111	45
Metro status			
Central	210	88	42
Suburban	1,080	317	29
Independent	706	176	25
Form of government			
Mayor-council	541	106	20
Council-manager	1,103	354	32
Commission	28	5	18
Town meeting	63	40	64
Representative town meeting	9	5	56
Council-administrator (manager)	201	54	27
Council-elected executive	51	17	33

the New England division show the highest percentages reporting citizen involvement in fiscal decision making (59%), followed by Pacific Coast localities (45%), whereas the local governments in the East South-Central and West South-Central divisions show the lowest percentages (17% and 20%, respectively). Mayor-council and city commission forms of government also show the lowest percentages (20% and 18%, respectively), whereas town meeting and representative town meeting communities show the highest percentages (64% and 56%, respectively).

INFORMING CITIZENS ABOUT COUNCIL AGENDA ITEMS THAT MIGHT AFFECT THEM

The vast majority of local governments (97%) inform citizens about upcoming council agenda items that affect them, such as fee increases or reductions in service; only 61 out of 2,057 local governments indicated that they do not inform citizens about these issues (not shown). Many local governments use more than one method of information sharing. Slightly more than 80% reported placing notices in newspapers and on the local government website; about 38% use cable TV

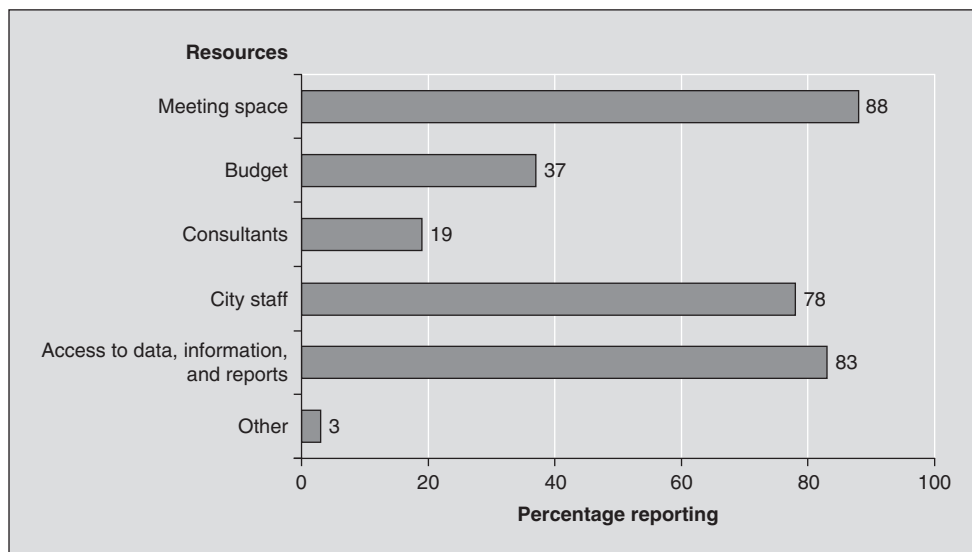


Figure 4/2 Resources provided to citizens to solve problems and implement decisions (n = 751)

channels, and 30% send newsletters to all residents (Table 4/4). Twenty-eight percent use e-mail to let citizens know about upcoming council agenda items, while 192 respondents (10%) use social networking. Durham, North Carolina, for example, uses Twitter to post repair schedules and other events that affect citizens. The Village of Howard, Wisconsin, has set up a Facebook page targeting young people. Cupertino, California, uses Twitter and Facebook. Some local governments post videos on YouTube.

Not all citizens have access to traditional forms of communication (e.g., council meetings and other public forums), and the survey asked how the local government engages residents who may not typically participate in discussions about community issues. In addition to holding public meetings, the City of Long Beach, California, goes out into the community to engage citizens in meetings that they regularly attend rather than trying to attract people to special meetings that they are not used to attending. In St. Mary's County, Maryland, the outreach is on a case-by-case basis; staff will go door to door, for example, if there is an issue affecting a neighborhood of primarily renters. Plymouth, Michigan, holds its commission meetings in neighborhood parks during the summer; in Chanute, Kansas, the city manager holds a question-and-answer session on talk radio twice a month. Duluth, Minnesota,

has a forum for homeless citizens once a year, while Sedgwick County, Kansas, seeks out groups, such as the homeless, who might be affected by issues. Some local governments use neighborhood and religious groups to reach out to populations that might not be connected through mainstream channels.

USE OF CITIZEN SURVEYS

It is important to the success of any government activity to ensure that citizens are well represented when public opinion is sought. Citizen surveys give voice to a broader, more representative group of citizens than do public meetings. In fact, people with child care needs, who work evening shifts, or who are uncomfortable in large gatherings may not be able to attend public meetings at all; they can, however, complete a citizen survey.

Citizen surveys can provide elected officials and local government staff with valuable information that can be used to identify and address problems, successes, and communication needs. For example, if a citizen survey reveals dissatisfaction with a reduced number of weekly trash pickups, it may be that residents need more information about the budget implications of more frequent pickups. Citizen surveys can also be used in the strategic planning process.

Table 4/5 LOCAL GOVERNMENT USE OF CITIZEN SURVEYS

Classification	No. reporting	Yes % of (A)
Total	2,056	51
Population group		
Over 1,000,000	7	71
500,000–1,000,000	16	75
250,000–499,999	28	68
100,000–249,999	98	61
50,000–99,999	166	62
25,000–49,999	275	55
10,000–24,999	504	52
5,000–9,999	494	47
2,500–4,999	464	44
Under 2,500	4	25
Geographic division		
New England	148	42
Mid-Atlantic	211	40
East North-Central	375	52
West North-Central	282	52
South Atlantic	367	47
East South-Central	79	35
West South-Central	193	51
Mountain	148	64
Pacific Coast	253	66
Metro status		
Central	222	65
Suburban	1,098	56
Independent	736	39
Form of government		
Mayor-council	559	48
Council-manager	1,125	58
Commission	30	40
Town meeting	62	36
Representative town meeting	9	44
County council–administrator (manager)	214	35
County council–elected executive	57	25

Table 4/4 HOW CITIZENS ARE INFORMED ABOUT COUNCIL AGENDA ITEMS AFFECTING THEM

Classification	No. reporting (A)	Notices in newspapers % of (A)	Local government website % of (A)	E-mail % of (A)	Newsletter sent to all residents % of (A)	Cable TV channel % of (A)	Social networking % of (A)	Other % of (A)
Total	2,006	82	82	28	30	37.5	10	13
Population group								
Over 1,000,000	7	57	100	14	0	71	0	14
500,000–1,000,000	16	75	88	44	19	69	25	25
250,000–499,999	28	79	89	54	29	64	21	11
100,000–249,999	95	81	93	35	18	47	19	16
50,000–99,999	162	86	93	43	34	58	14	7
25,000–49,999	268	84	91	35	28	47	11	8
10,000–24,999	492	82	86	31	35	42	9	11
5,000–9,999	484	82	80	22	28	33	8	12
2,500–4,999	451	81	65	16	30	20	6	19
Under 2,500	3	67	67	67	0	0	0	33
Geographic division								
New England	145	76	88	29	12	45	7	15
Mid-Atlantic	197	76	79	21	37	27	8	10
East North-Central	359	75	80	23	31	38	7	13
West North-Central	269	84	80	22	31	44	10	11
South Atlantic	361	88	83	29	28	37	13	8
East South-Central	80	86	65	25	15	35	6	15
West South-Central	193	81	70	20	23	35	7	22
Mountain	147	88	87	35	36	33	14	17
Pacific Coast	255	88	93	44	40	40	12	11
Metro status								
Central	212	83	93	42	25	61	24	13
Suburban	1,076	77	89	32	43	38	8	10
Independent	718	90	68	16	12	30	7	16
Form of government								
Mayor-council	546	82	72	20	28	28	7	15
Council-manager	1,104	82	87	32	38	46	12	11
Commission	27	89	82	15	26	30	4	7
Town meeting	62	71	89	19	13	36	5	19
Representative town meeting	9	56	100	11	11	33	0	0
Council–administrator (manager)	203	86	80	30	6	24	9	10
Council–elected executive	55	87	53	20	7	16	4	22

Approximately 51% of respondents reported that they conduct citizen surveys (Table 4/5). Population size appears to be a factor in this regard as more than 60% of local governments with a population of 50,000 and above, and more than 70% of those with a population of 500,000 and above, reported engaging in this form of outreach. Cities with the council-manager form of government show a higher percentage (58%) reporting the use of citizen surveys than do the other forms of city government, and counties with the council-administrator form show 35% compared with 25% of the council–elected executive form of government.

The majority of local governments (76%) focus their citizen surveys on specific services, such as refuse collection, parks and recreation, and police and fire (not shown). This allows local government officials to collect detailed information about such services so that they can better identify and focus on any problems that need to be addressed.

CONCLUSION

In part because of concern about barriers to citizen engagement, such as time, space, and format, online tools such as Peak Democracy's Open

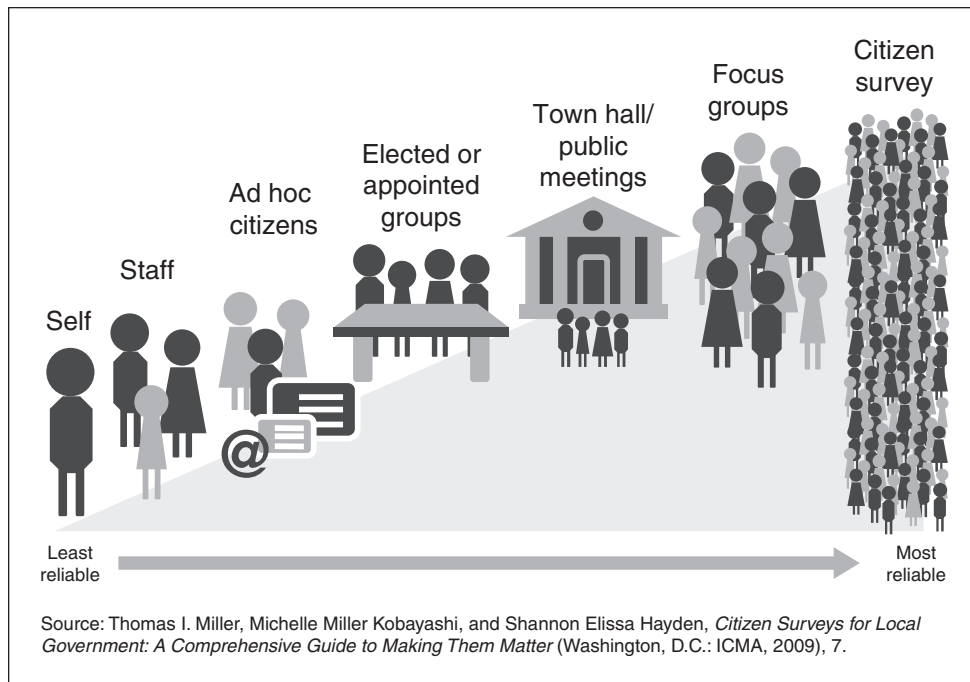


Figure 4/3 *The continuum of reliable public sentiment*

City Hall™⁴ and the work on E-democracy.org⁵ are gaining prominence as a means of engaging citizens when and where it is easiest for them to participate. However, local government staff and decision makers do not also participate in the online conversations; the “engagement” takes place only among citizens, so the dialogue is unlikely to result in any meaningful action. For the online tools to be effective, there must be a commitment on the part of both citizens and local gov-

ernment to participate in the discussion. At a minimum, a feedback loop is required.

Another essential component of citizen engagement is access to information. Citizens need to have enough information to inform their reactions and proposals. They need to know, for example, the extent of funding reductions anticipated for social service providers, such as food banks and homeless shelters. They need to know what the anticipated reduction in funding from the state will

be for their locality. Without information to put the challenges facing local government into context, citizens are at a disadvantage when participating in problem solving and less able to appreciate the improvements in programs and service delivery. CitiStat, which is used by local governments across the country, provides performance data that citizens can access easily to gain the necessary perspective.⁶

As local governments convene the meaningful conversations that are required to further citizen engagement, it will be worthwhile for ICMA to conduct further research into the use of online tools, as well as ways in which local governments can further engage and integrate citizens and professional, social, and neighborhood networks in support of the well-being of their communities.

¹This discussion was led by Janet Denhardt, professor and doctoral director, School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University.

²National Civic League, “Strategic Visioning and Strategic Planning,” ncl.org/cs/services/visioning.html (accessed December 1, 2009).

³Gerald L. Gordon, *Strategic Planning for Local Government*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: ICMA, 2005), 2.

⁴Open City Hall™, a public comment process that allows residents to read what others are saying online and respond or post their own statements, is monitored by Peak Democracy to ensure the order and decorum of a government meeting; see peakdemocracy.com/.

⁵The mission of E-Democracy.Org is to expand participation and build stronger democracies and communities through the power of information and communication technologies and strategies; see pages.e-democracy.org/Mission_and_Goals (accessed December 2, 2009).

⁶For a full description of CitiStat, which was developed by Baltimore, Maryland, as a tool for examining the policies and procedures of city departments and analyzing data to identify areas of improvement in service delivery, see Marsha R. B. Schachtel, “CitiStat and the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance: Using Information to Improve Communication and Community,” *National Civic Review* 90, no. 3 (2001): 253–266.