

TAKEAWAYS

- › Learn how local government professionals prioritize different types of public participation.
- › Learn how Rancho Cordova is guiding online public participation toward an informed, constructive dialog.





THE EXTENT OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

*ICMA SURVEY EXPLORES PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT
AND THE TENOR OF CIVIC DISORDER*

**By Robert Vogel, Evelina Moulder,
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Local governments use a variety of strategies and techniques to encourage public involvement in local planning and decision making. The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) describes public involvement as occurring at five levels ranging from informing all the way to empowering.

In this article, we summarize the responses to ICMA's 2012 State of the Profession Survey, which asked respondents to rate the importance of achieving the five levels of involvement in their communities. The levels are illustrated in a case study of an online public participation project in Rancho Cordova, California. We conclude with a list of questions to help local government managers improve their public participation strategy. >>



Goals of Public Participation

Previous ICMA surveys examined how local governments share information with residents. The 2012 survey delved more deeply into the nature and purposes of local government public participation efforts.

IAP2 has designed a widely-accepted Public Participation Spectrum that identifies a range of interactions that a local government can have with its community. Distinguished by increasing levels of direct public involvement and intended outcomes, the IAP2 Spectrum includes the following five types of goals that a government can strive for in its public participation efforts: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. A number of the 2012 survey questions addressed the perceived importance of these types of public interactions within the local government profession.

Inform: Eighty-five percent of the responding local governments report that it is “important” or “highly important” to provide the public with objective information to assist them in understanding problems/solutions/alternatives.

Consult: Seventy-five percent indicate that it is “important” or “highly important” to work directly with the public to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

WHILE ENCOURAGING GREATER PARTICIPATION BY THE PUBLIC, LOCAL GOVERNMENTS GENERALLY STOP SHORT OF PLACING FINAL DECISION MAKING DIRECTLY IN THE HANDS OF THE PUBLIC.

Involve: Some 70 percent report that it is “important” or “highly important” to obtain feedback from the public on analyses of problems, solutions, and alternatives.

Collaborate: The results show that 57 percent of respondents reported that it is “important” or “highly important” to partner with the public in development of alternatives, identification of the preferred solution, and decision making.

Empower: Nineteen percent of respondents indicate that it is “important” or “highly important” to place decision making in the hands of the public.

Being clear about the underlying purpose of the engagement effort as well as the promise it intends to make to the public is essential to the success of any public participation effort. Without objective information and a clearly understood purpose, the public cannot provide meaningful feedback nor can they partner with the local government in developing alternatives, identifying solutions, and

making decisions. Unless concerns and aspirations are understood, problems cannot be successfully addressed.

Rancho Cordova: A Case Study

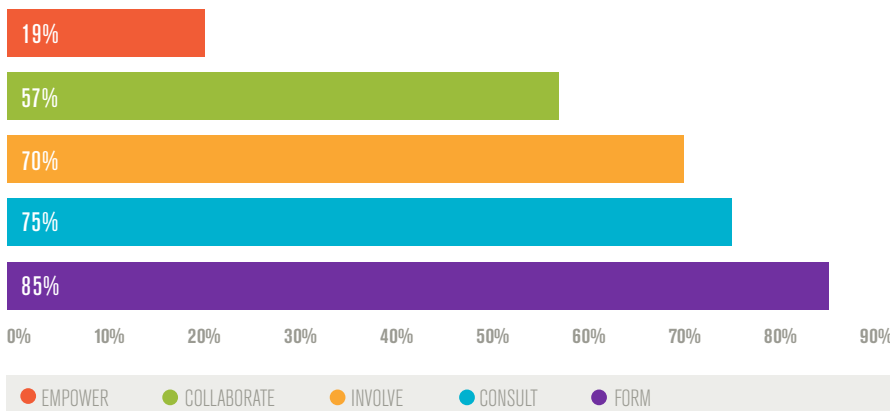
When residents of Rancho Cordova, California (population 67,000), asked their city council to loosen restrictions on raising chickens, the council wanted to first hear from a broad spectrum of residents. Before finalizing their decision, councilmembers wanted to encourage participants to first learn about the issue, then engage in a nuanced discussion without polarizing the community for or against the proposal.

Under the leadership of City Manager Ted Gaebler, the city decided to use the Open Town Hall online public engagement service to broaden the discussion beyond the few who typically attend in-person meetings. To encourage the public to understand the issues around this proposed new ordinance, the online service presented objective background information before inviting users to participate in the online discussion.

To ensure that the public’s concerns and aspirations were well understood and considered, the city created a map of “Engaged Rancho Cordova Districts,” enabling decisionmakers and others to see what residents from each district were saying. Anyone could click on the “word cloud” in the online tool to see statements containing frequently occurring words (e.g., enforcement) and on demographic tallies to see trends in perspectives by age and gender.

Compared with Rancho Cordova’s traditional face-to-face meetings, par-

Figure 1. Percent of Respondents Who Considered the Five Goals Important or Very Important



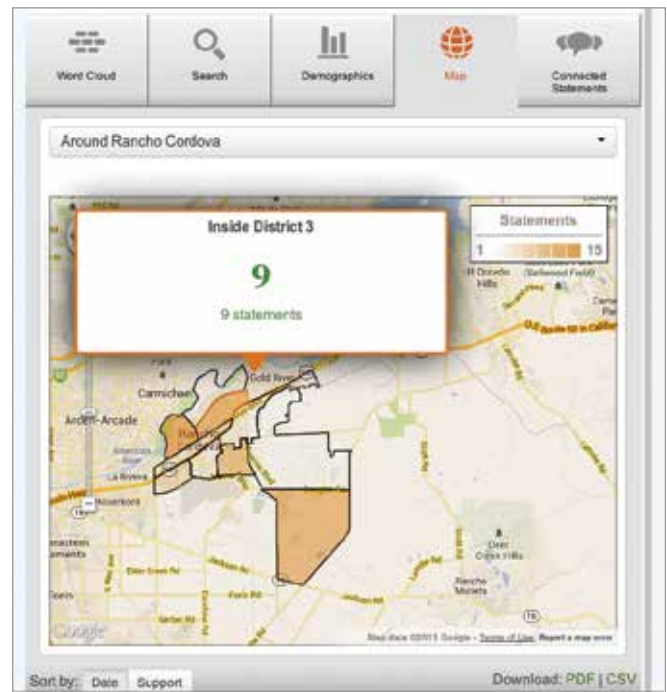
Source: ICMA State of the Profession 2012 survey.

Figure 2. Framing the Online Discussion with an Objective Introduction



Residents were encouraged to read the introduction before participating.

Figure 3. Clickable Map of Engaged Rancho Cordova Districts



Residents and staff could click on the map to review responses by district.

participation in the online forum was both large and civil. More than 560 residents visited the forum, 66 posted or supported a statement, and 147 subscribed to updates enabling them to remain involved after the forum closed. Statements were monitored for compliance with the city’s guidelines for civility and all but one were found in compliance.

Much like a public hearing, each participant was allowed to make only one statement. Monitoring statements and allowing only one per resident resulted in a collaborative online forum providing clear feedback on the proposed ordinance as well as potential improvements to that ordinance.

After the period for public discussion had concluded, the council directed staff to prepare a draft ordinance that reflected the feedback and addressed the concerns expressed both on the forum and in other public venues. This outcome was also posted on the forum and e-mailed to forum subscribers to

strengthen the partnership between the city administration and the public in the decision-making process.

In line with the preference of most of the respondents to the ICMA survey, Rancho Cordova chose not to place decision making directly in the hands of the public. The online forum was designed specifically to preclude the public perception of a public vote or a referendum.

The city never mentioned the “v word” (vote), and it chose to collect open-ended statements from residents rather than have them respond to a poll or survey that asked for a yes/no position on the proposed new ordinance. The forum can be found at www.peakdemocracy.com/1379.

Civic Discourse and Extent of Public Participation

Citing the complexity of issues and the breadth and depth of knowledge needed for sound policies, local government officials often express

reluctance for expanding the public’s direct role in decision making. Over the past several years, the often disconcerting tenor of civic discourse has also contributed to concerns about greater public participation.

A perception of the public as increasingly “nasty, brutish, short” and polarized inevitably raises questions for local officials about the efficacy of their collaboration with that public.

Civic discourse. Close to 40 percent of ICMA survey respondents described the civic discourse in their community as “very polarized and strident, often rude” or “somewhat polarized and strident, occasionally rude.” Respondents in the New England division show the highest percentage (45 percent) reporting civic discourse in their community as “very polarized and strident, often rude” or “somewhat polarized and strident, occasionally rude,” as did 44 percent of respondents in those



communities with the town meeting form of government. The 2013 Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate survey *Civility in America*,² which was conducted nationally online, found 71 percent of respondents believed the lack of civility in the United States was worse than several years ago, and 82 percent believed the general lack of civility in politics is harming the country.

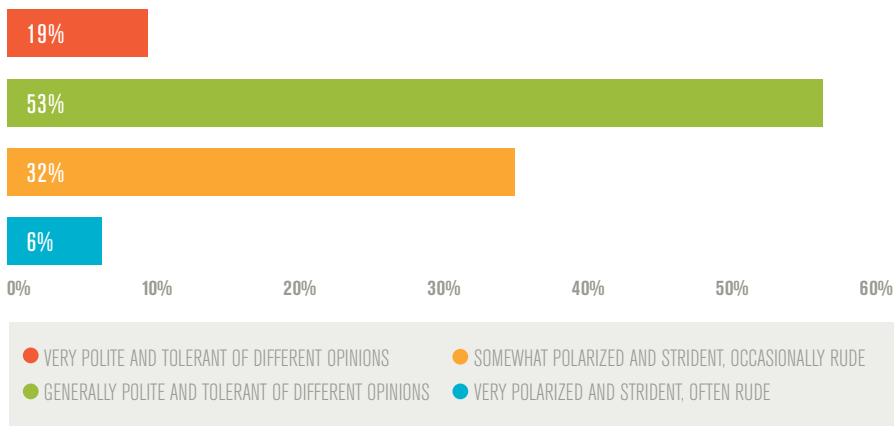
Slightly more than 50 percent of respondents with council/administrator/manager and council elected executive also described civic discourse as “very polarized and strident often rude” or “somewhat polarized and strident, occasionally rude.” Of particular interest is that out of the 777 survey respondents overall who reported that civic discourse is “very polarized and strident, often rude” or “somewhat polarized and strident, occasionally rude,” 399 also indicated that partnering with the public in development of alternatives, identification of preferred solutions, and decision making is “important” or highly important.”

If we look at the same group of respondents, we also see that 127 of them reported that it is “important” or highly important” to put decision making in the hands of the public. Not surprisingly, when these 127 are examined by form of government, the town meeting and representative town meeting governments represent, respectively, 19 percent and 20 percent of the total respondents.

These are by far the highest percentages of respondents by form of government that rated putting decision making in the hands of the public as “important” or “highly important” and rated civic discourse as “very polarized and strident, often rude” or “somewhat polarized and strident, occasionally rude.”

Level of resident participation. When asked about the level of resident participation, only 12 percent of

Figure 2. Percent of Respondents Who Described Civic Discourse in Their Community



respondents indicated that there is a high level of participation in their local government’s engagement efforts. A majority of local governments in communities under 10,000 population show low participation levels. Pacific Coast respondents show the highest percentage—19 percent—reporting a high level of participation.

Outcome

Local governments are encouraging the public to participate in the identification of problems and their solutions, to share their concerns and aspirations, and to provide feedback and develop alternatives as part of the decision-making process. The outcome is optimized when local managers first ask themselves these six questions:

- What is the readiness and capacity of my organization for public engagement?
- Why am I involving the residents?
- What do I want to achieve?
- What do I want to know?
- What is the role of the public?
- How is that role communicated to the public in face-to-face and online interactions?

Answers to these questions³ enable local governments to constructively engage the public in both face-to-face

meetings and online public participation methods. Through careful design and monitoring of online forums, localities can significantly improve the effectiveness of public participation by expanding the number of people participating, restoring the civility of their participation, and ensuring clarity about the role of the public in final decision making. **PM**

ENDNOTES

PeakDemocracy.com.
www.webershandwick.com/uploads/news/files/Civility_in_America_2013_Exec_Summary.pdf.
 Page 12.
 Two excellent tools managers should use in their planning are the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (<http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/spectrum.pdf>) and the Center for Management Strategies Assessment Tool for Civic Engagement Practices (http://icma.org/en/results/management_strategies/leading_practices/civic_engagement).



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