

Measuring the Success of Local Public Engagement

You've devoted time, money and staff (and maybe consultant resources) to a public engagement effort about an important local plan, issue or policy. But so what? Did the process make any difference? Did the local agency benefit? Were the participants satisfied with their experience? What worked and what didn't? And what lessons will your city or county take from this experience into future participation activities?

Each local effort to develop and implement a public engagement process will be at least somewhat unique. There will be differences in the issue or policy you address, the number or demographics of those participating, the specific means through which participants generate ideas and recommendations, and the way local officials use the results in ultimate decision making. The history, conditions and dynamics of each community setting will also differ.

Whatever the approach, local agencies that take the time to assess their engagement strategies and activities are more likely to learn from their experiences and improve their future efforts.

Different Outcomes to Review

There are at least four different public engagement outcomes that local officials can review:

1. **The appropriateness and effectiveness of the engagement process design and delivery, including the “satisfaction” of participants with the process.** (*Did the chosen process or approach “fit” the problem, provide the sort of information needed, and meet participation goals; and was it done well?*)
2. **The impacts on public decisions, policies and actions.** (*Was the ultimate agency decision different and/or better than would otherwise have been the case?*)
3. **The changes to the capacity for participation by community residents.** (*Has the completed engagement activity made it more or less likely that the public, including appropriate neighborhood/community organizations, has the interest, information, and skills to get involved?*)
4. **The changes to the local agency's capacity to effectively develop and carry out other public engagement efforts in the future?** (*Was the public engagement activity seen solely as a one-time event, or are sponsors using it to build a more sustained agency capacity for soliciting the public's ideas and recommendations?*)

Relatively few local agencies seem to formally review their public engagement activities in a regular and systematic way. The reviews and assessments that are done tend to focus on the first potential outcome (above). Far fewer focus on the second, and fewer still consider the third or fourth.

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Questions to Ask

However local agencies that sponsor public engagement activities can ask a few basic but critical questions that will provide important feedback to assess a specific public engagement activity and improve future efforts. While the result may not be a rigorous “scientific” study; it will be useful information, especially if the results are shared broadly - and remembered - within the city or county. Also see our *Assessing Public Engagement Effectiveness: Rapid Review Worksheets* (www.ca-ilg.org/rapidreview) as a possible tool for such reviews.

Here are some questions to ask.

1. **A Plan?** Did appropriate local officials develop a clear public engagement plan that included: a stated purpose, clarity about intended participants, a public engagement process design, a timeline, clear roles for appointed officials, staff and (if appropriate) consultants, a budget, and how recommendations would be integrated into final decision making? Were connections made to any broader public engagement goals of the city or county? Also, was there early input into public engagement planning from the community or other stakeholders who were the intended process participants?
2. **Appropriate Participation?** Was the actual degree and nature of the participation appropriate to the issue and in service to public engagement process goals? Was the participant outreach or selection process effective? Did local officials make successful efforts to ensure that the community’s diversity of views and population were represented? What worked and what didn’t to help secure the intended participation?
3. **Good Process?** As appropriate to the intent of your process, was background information provided to participants so they were prepared to take part? Were informational or other materials used in the process helpful? Assuming the intent was a deliberative public process, were there sufficient opportunities for back and forth discussion among participants that allowed for the exchange of informed views, consideration of alternatives, and the formulation of recommendations? Was the process appropriate for the nature of the input and the degree of specificity you were seeking? Were participants’ language, literacy, age and culture taken into consideration in terms of the process design? If a consultant/facilitator was used, did (s)he provide a safe and well-managed environment for people to participate effectively?
4. **Talk Linked to Action?** Did public officials demonstrably consider the ideas or recommendations resulting from the public involvement process in their final decision making? Did the public involvement process result in local officials making a more informed and/or better decision? Was there greater support for the (resulting) new policy or action? Was there feedback to participants about how their recommendations were or were not used and why?
5. **Satisfied Participants?** Did participants view the public involvement process as transparent, well-managed, inclusive, and appropriate to the issue(s) under consideration? Did they believe their input was welcomed, heard and considered? Would they be more or less likely to participate in other such processes in the future?

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6. **Effective Internal and External Communication?** Were you satisfied with the *internal* communication between and among appropriate local agency officials, staff and (any) consultants during the engagement process? Was there an effective *external* communications effort to the larger public during or at the conclusion of the engagement process about the intent or progress of the process, or about its outcomes?
7. **Community Capacity?** Did the public engagement process provide residents with additional skills, knowledge and experiences likely to encourage their role as committed and effective community members? Have participant names been added to appropriate data bases for future engagement opportunities? How can the local agency continue to draw on and develop these community capacities?
8. **Key Lessons?** Has the review of the public engagement effort involved participants, appropriate elected and appointed officials, staff, any consultants used, and any others with useful information to share? What are the most important lessons identified, and how can your local agency take what's been learned and apply it to future public involvement efforts?

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 and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on public engagement, go to www.ca-ilg.org/engagement. To access this resource online, visit www.ca-ilg.org/MeasuringPESuccess.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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