

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, city and county officials often find that only a relatively small number of community members actually take part in public conversations and forums intended to inform and shape local decision-making.

A failure to involve a generally representative 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 the support that the final decisions receive in the community.

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 in public life.

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. Please see www.ca-ilg.org/engagement for more information.

- **BUILD COMMUNITY CAPACITY TO PARTICIPATE** – Before specific issues are on the table, help develop the knowledge and capacity of less involved communities to better understand issues and to take part in public engagement opportunities. The development of citizen or leadership “academies” that are targeted to specific communities, and offered in translation, is one way to help accomplish this goal.
- **DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS** – The perceptions of less involved communities about the commitment of local officials to truly want their

engagement can be critical. Personal relationships developed by elected officials and local agency staff with community, leadership and advocacy organizations will reap many rewards.

- **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 successful in reaching the broadest diversity of your residents.
- **GET HELP** – Identify and seek the help and advice of 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 in 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** – Holding public meetings or other public engagement processes in community settings that are known and accessible to the communities you wish to reach, perhaps co-sponsored by respected intermediary organizations, can help achieve your goals for broader participation. Explore what engagement tools and processes will best meet the needs and conditions of specific populations.
- **HAVE SPECIFIC GOALS** – For public engagement efforts, take the time to create targeted goals for harder to reach communities. In general, encourage attention and learning about inclusive engagement throughout your local 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 up to date 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** – Think about this kind of inclusion beyond the occasional public engagement effort. Explore the invitation and integration of diverse community voices as a part of your overall strategy to inform and support the goals and programs of local government.

To reach the Institute's Public Engagement program, contact Terry Amsler at tamsler@ca-ilg.org or 916.658.8263. Or visit our website at www.ca-ilg.org/engagement.