

Three Orientations of Local Government to Public Engagement: Passive – Active – Sustaining

Throughout California, most local agency efforts to involve residents occur occasionally as one-time public engagement activities that are focused on issues such as a general plan update, annual budgeting, a public works project, a public safety issue, a climate change plan, etc. Fewer cities and counties think about and “embed” a *capacity* to regularly consider and use public engagement tools as an ongoing part of local governance.

There is no right or wrong to what any local agency does in this regard. What is “right” is what makes sense for a community and its local officials at a given point in time. Certainly when the press on available local revenues in California is so great, it would be irresponsible of local officials to undertake new activities without the resources to carry them out effectively.

At the same time, the benefits of effective and inclusive public engagement are significant. They include: better identification of the public’s values and ideas; more informed residents; improved local agency decision-making and actions; and more trust and confidence in local government.

There are several useful caveats for any effort to embed a greater capacity and use of public engagement:

- Local officials and residents alike often bring with them an understanding of public engagement based on what they themselves have seen and experienced. This can be an advantage or a limitation. The best initial strategy is a willingness to learn more about public engagement purposes and options.
- Public engagement (beyond a public comment period or public hearing) is more likely to be useful and successful - and replicated - when it is timely, directly relevant to issues that matter to the community, and invested with sufficient attention and resources to be effective and to make a difference.
- The development of a more encompassing and sustaining public engagement plan or strategy is best pursued as a partnership between local officials and the community.

Particularly for those communities that wish to broadly examine their public engagement activities and capacities and consider the tasks, structures and policies required for the strategic and recurrent engagement of the public, the following categories or “orientations” of a local government’s commitment to public engagement may be helpful.

Working from less to more of a “sustaining” commitment to public engagement, the following three categories can help communities to be more aware of their present efforts to involve the public and to suggest approaches that embed public participation into local decision-making.

1. Local Agency Public Engagement: A *Passive* Orientation

- Generally, attention is primarily to the minimum legal requirements for public engagement, including public comment periods and public hearings.
- Public engagement beyond public comments and hearings is episodic; it happens now and then.
- There are few public engagement routines and practices, and they vary department by department.
- Advances in public engagement practices generally rely on actions of “champions” – individuals in local government or in the community that encourage or call for a fuller and more participatory public engagement effort by the local agency to address a particular issue.
- There are few if any organized efforts to increase the agency’s or the community’s knowledge of public engagement.

2. Local Agency Public Engagement: An *Active* Orientation

- The local agency sets goals that specifically call for a more informed and engaged community.
- There are expectations that more extensive and deliberative public engagement will be used for certain local decision-making (such as general plans and budgeting).
- The city or county has selected public engagement routines and practices, based on previous experiences, and there are some efforts made to learn from these experiences.
- There are efforts made to enhance the public engagement-related knowledge, skills and strategies of local officials to support the pursuit of more effective and inclusive public engagement (such as citizen academies and leadership development opportunities).
- Opportunities for public engagement are transparent and broadly disseminated, including through the local agency’s website.

- There are also efforts made to enhance the public engagement-related knowledge, skills and capacities of local residents and communities to better understand local government and to participate more effectively. This may include capacity building assistance for community organizations.
- Residents are asked about their public engagement experiences (in general resident surveys and as part of specific public engagement activities.)

3. Local Agency Public Engagement: A *Sustaining* Orientation

- There is a commitment to a longer term and “co-produced” public engagement plan, developed by the local agency and community participants, which outlines how the city or county may best develop and maintain a capacity for the ongoing use of public engagement approaches to address appropriate local issues.
- There is an adopted set of principles that generally define and encourage the use of effective and inclusive public engagement when and as appropriate.
- There may also be a checklist, protocols or “toolkit” to guide information sharing with the community, and help determine and carry out an appropriate public engagement approach (if any).
- There are established public engagement-related plans and performance goals for appropriate local agency departments.
- There are established public engagement performance criteria for relevant individual agency staff.
- There are local agency staff/offices with appropriate public engagement responsibilities, or (where available resources make it possible) a staff office/position primarily “charged” with public engagement responsibilities for the local agency.
- In addition to stand-alone efforts to enhance the public engagement-related knowledge, skills and capacities of local residents, the participants of citizen academies (and similar leadership development courses/programs) are connected to future public engagement activities and to opportunities for ongoing public service on formal and informal local boards, commissions, committees and task forces.
- There are mutual partnerships developed with neighborhood and community organizations to involve their members, or through these groups to involve the wider community, in appropriate public engagement activities over time. In some cases this may include structured relationships/agreements between neighborhood associations or community groups with one or more local government departments

for the purpose of ensuring the engagement of a neighborhood or community in specific policy or topic areas.

These community “partners” have the opportunity to share engagement experiences with one another and to participate in assessing the effectiveness of the public engagement agreements/protocols.

- There is an established and ongoing body, process or protocol that provides community representatives with input into the direction, operation and adaptation of a city or county public engagement plan, system, or set of practices.
- There is an established framework, consistently applied, for the self-evaluation of local agency-related public engagement, with a commitment to share results broadly across the local agency and the community alike; and to apply the lessons learned to future public engagement activities.

A community with a “sustaining orientation” to public engagement may build on the practices of an “active orientation,” adding those appropriate additional practices that help support and maintain the effective and strategic use of public engagement over time on a “when needed/as needed” basis.

A community with this capacity will continually scan its public, civic or economic sectors for opportunities that call for more participatory and deliberative engagement. It will have the vision, leadership, knowledge, capacity, protocols and skills to successfully assess the need for public engagement in given instances and, if appropriate, craft the best strategic response.

A community with a sustaining orientation toward public engagement will also prepare its residents to participate, and its local officials to seek community input when appropriate. It will develop the skills among residents and local officials and staff alike to facilitate public processes. It will create the public engagement goals, principles, protocols and plans that will guide and direct participatory practices. And finally, it will create structures where residents and local officials can jointly develop the engagement plans and protocols, assess their progress, learn together, and continue to adapt their public engagement efforts to ever changing local needs.

It is important to stress that there are few if any individual California counties or cities that have adopted all of these ideas relating to sustaining public engagement. However each of these practices has occurred in at least one or more communities. A “sustaining orientation” toward public engagement is a goal that interested communities may wish to set and then pursue by appropriate steps or stages, assessing and adapting their work as they go.

For an evolving set of resources on this topic:

www.ca-ilg.org/sustainingpublicengagement.

To access all ILG public engagement online information and resources:

www.ca-ilg.org/engagement.

For a list of all public engagement-related publications: www.ca-ilg.org/pepubs.

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The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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