

Why Engage the Public?

Cities and counties throughout California are applying a variety of public engagement strategies and approaches to address issues ranging from land use and budgeting to climate change and public safety. They are discovering a number of benefits that can result from the successful engagement of their residents in local decision making. These include the following potential outcomes.

- **Better identification of the public's values, ideas and recommendations**

Elections help identify voter preferences, and communication with individual constituents provide additional information to local officials about resident views on various topics. However gaps often remain in understanding the public's views and preferences on proposed public agency actions and decisions. This can especially be the case for residents or populations that tend to participate less frequently, or when simple "pro" or "con" views don't help solve the problem at hand. Good public engagement can provide more nuanced and collective views about an issue by a broader spectrum of residents.

- **More informed residents - about issues and about local agencies**

Most residents do not regularly follow local policy matters carefully. While a relatively small number do, most community members are not familiar, for instance, with the ins and outs of a local agency budget and budget process, or knowledgeable about planning for a new general plan, open space use, or affordable housing. Good public engagement can present opportunities for residents to better understand an issue and its impacts and to see local agency challenges as their challenges as well.

- **Improved local agency decision-making and actions, with better impacts and outcomes**

Members of the public have information about their community's history and needs. They also have a sense of the kind of place where they and their families want to live. They can add new voices and new ideas to enrich thinking and planning on topics that concern them. This kind of knowledge, integrated into local decision making, helps ensure that public decisions are optimal for the community and best fit current conditions and needs.

- **Enhanced community buy-in and support, with less contentiousness**

The public engagement experiences of many communities indicate that participation by residents and others can generate support for final decisions. Most simply, perhaps, participation generates "ownership." Involved residents may be able to suggest how a proposed policy, project or program might be formed, shaped or funded in a way that will generate their support for its implementation. Earlier and more informed discussions, by a cross-section of residents of different viewpoints, usually offer a better chance for more collaborative problem solving than blogs, public hearings and the like. Good public engagement reduces the need for unnecessary decision-making "do-over."

- **Faster project implementation with less need to revisit again**

Making public decisions is one thing; successfully implementing these decisions is often something else altogether. The buy-in discussed above, and the potential for broad agreement on a decision, are important contributors to faster implementation. For instance, a cross section of the community, city, or county may come together to work on a vision or plan that includes a collective sense of what building height limits should be. If this is adopted by the local agency and guides planning and development over time, the issue will be less likely to re-occur repeatedly as an issue for the community and for local officials.

- **More trust - in each other and in local government**

Whatever their differences, people who work together on common problems usually have more appreciation of the problem and of each other. Many forms of public engagement provide opportunity to get behind peoples' statements and understand the reasons for what they think and say. This helps enhance understanding and respect among the participants. It also inspires confidence that problems can be solved – which promotes more cooperation over time. Whether called social capital, community building, civic pride or good citizenship, such experiences help build stronger communities, cities and counties. Additionally, when a local agency promotes and is a part of these processes - and takes the ideas and recommendations of the public seriously - a greater trust and confidence in local government often results.

- **Higher rates of community participation and leadership development**

Engaging the public in new ways offers additional opportunities for people to take part in the civic and political life of their community. This may include community members who have traditionally participated less than others. These are avenues for not only contributing to local decisions but for residents to gain knowledge, experience and confidence in the workings of their local government. These are future neighborhood volunteers, civic and community leaders, commissioners, and elected officials. In whatever role they choose, these are individuals who will be more prepared and more qualified as informed residents, involved citizens and future leaders.

Find this paper on our website at: www.ca-ilg.org/WhyEngage

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