

There are many types and levels of public engagement. Do you have a process for deciding which approach to use when?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 1 OF 14**



The engagement activities described in this guide are some of the most common examples of how citizens and government interact. They are part of a broad spectrum of engagement work (see Spectrum of Public Engagement Activities chart).

Different activities are helpful for different reasons, and they tend to rely on and complement one another. Some are more difficult and time-intensive to organize than others. Local officials who are experienced in democratic governance point out the importance of being strategic about these choices. “It isn’t practical to engage citizens in every public decision or problem – nor would citizens want to be engaged in everything,” says Robin Beltramini, a city councilmember in Troy, Michigan. “But if you’re not engaging them proactively and intensively in at least some decisions, you’re probably not doing enough.”

Taking Stock, Picking Tools

Portland, Oregon (pop. 566,000)
Contact: Office of Neighborhood Involvement,
(508) 823-4519, <http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/>

The City of Portland has a strong and varied public engagement system, including neighborhood district offices, a mini-grant program, advisory councils, a best practices recognition program and formal ties with organizations representing ‘under-engaged’ groups. The City uses a set of public involvement principles to guide local officials and staff in their engagement work:

- Partnership
- Early involvement
- Building Relationships and Community Capacity
- Inclusiveness and Equity
- Good Quality Process Design and Implementation
- Transparency
- Accountability

The City also uses a Public Involvement Toolkit that helps city employees and citizens decide what kind of engagement approach to use in a given situation. The Toolkit uses a set of assessment questions and a scorecard to help people find the tools they need.

Food for Thought and Engagement

DeSoto, Texas (pop. 48,200)
Contact: Kathy Maples Jones, 972-230-9648 or
kathy.jones@ci.desoto.tx.us

“DeSoto, Dining and Dialogue” (DDD) is a volunteer-run nonprofit organization that brings people from different cultural backgrounds together over dinner to discuss community issues. Three times a year, restaurants, churches and families open their doors to 8 to 10 of their fellow residents. Each of the host groups donates its own time, energy and food to the event. The most recent dinner, in 2010, included 120 people. Each Dialogue is run by a trained facilitator who leads the group in a series of prepared discussion questions. The City of DeSoto backs this initiative in a number of ways. A city employee provides administrative support. The Council provides \$5,000 to the DDD out of the city’s general fund. The city also markets the program on the city website, and promotes upcoming dinners at City Council meetings. The Mayor is an active participant in DDD, which was one of the cornerstone programs that qualified DeSoto to be chosen for the National Civic League’s All-America City Award in 2006.

MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT HOW YOU MAKE STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT DECISIONS:

- Which of the activities listed in the “Spectrum of Public Engagement Activities” chart have been used in your city?
- How effective are these various tools and strategies at reaching a broad range of residents?
- How does your community set goals for public engagement, and make decisions about what kinds of activities will fit their goals?
- Within local government, is there a formal or informal process by which public officials and employees make these decisions?

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Use the chart to list and categorize the different kinds of engagement activities that occur in your city.
- Work with an academic researcher, an independent scholar or some other ally to create a short history of recent attempts to engage the public. For an example, see “From Neighborhood Association System to Participatory Democracy – Broadening and Deepening Public Involvement in Portland, Oregon” (See Appendix).

What is a citizen?

The word “citizen” has a rich history in American democracy. However, it can also be a confusing word to use. Sometimes it is defined in a narrow, legal way, meaning only those people who hold U.S. passports or are eligible to vote. In this guide, “citizen” is used to mean “resident,” or “person.”

Spectrum of Public Engagement Activities*

* Adapted from a previous spectrum developed by the International Association for Public Participation

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	CIRCULATING INFORMATION	DISCUSSING AND CONNECTING	GATHERING INITIAL INPUT	DELIBERATING AND RECOMMENDING	DECIDING AND ACTING
<p><i>what is happening</i></p> <p>Local governments, nonprofits, civic organizations, the media, and citizens themselves are making information available about key public issues. Some of this is raw data, provided in ways that make it easy to use and analyze. Some cities also use “citizen’s academies” to give people a much closer look at how government works.</p>	<p>Citizens, local officials, city staff, and other stakeholders get regular opportunities to build relationships, discuss issues, and celebrate community.</p>	<p>Local governments, other organizations, the media, or citizens themselves reach out to gauge immediate public opinion on a particular issue or question.</p>	<p>Local governments, other organizations, the media, or citizens themselves recruit a wide range of people to address a public issue or decision. The sessions follow good group process guidelines. The participants talk about why the issue matters to them, consider a range of policy options, and make recommendations about what they think should be done.</p>	<p>Local officials and other decision-makers are making policy decisions, developing a plan, or creating a budget based (at least in part) on what they have heard from citizens and other stakeholders. Local officials, city staff, other organizations, and citizens themselves are taking action in a variety of ways to address key issues and opportunities.</p>	
<p><i>how it is happening</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online • media coverage • public meetings • citizen’s academies • online land use visualization tools • serious games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • public meetings • block parties • festivals • workshops • online forums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • surveys • polls • focus groups • listening sessions • public hearings • online crowd sourcing • Geographic Info. Systems (GIS) • online budget simulators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • small face-to-face discussions • online deliberations • large action forums or town hall meetings • deliberations that occur as part of existing meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • individual volunteer activities • action teams and committees • changes made by organizations • policy decisions • strategic plans • comp plans • budgets 	