

# How much is the city spending – and saving – on public engagement annually?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 11 OF 14**

Coming up with a cost-benefit analysis for public engagement activities in your city can be a difficult but rewarding exercise. You may discover that some of the resources allocated to engagement are not being used wisely; you may also find that in some cases, devoting more resources to engagement could save the city substantial amounts of time and money. Calculating engagement costs may also help you answer skeptics who argue that public engagement is a ‘frill’ – you can show how it is already built into the work of government.

Most cities do not specify a total amount for public engagement in their annual budgets. Financial costs and budget line items only provide part of the picture; the bulk of the cost to local government typically comes in the form of staff time

devoted by city employees. Furthermore, public engagement responsibilities are often spread among many different staffers, and represent only a small portion of their time. Finally, employees are often caught up in tasks that are labeled as “public engagement” but which are fairly superficial and do not involve large numbers of citizens in a meaningful way.

Understanding what you are spending on engagement in money and staff time can help you decide how to leverage those investments more effectively. It can also help you and your allies determine how resources outside local government might be added to the mix, in order to make public engagement more of a shared community responsibility.



## MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT SPENDING ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

- How does public engagement show up in line items on the city budget?
- Who are the principal city staffers carrying out public engagement work, and how much of their time do they spend on it?
- Can you estimate the cost of even the small portions of staff resources spent on public engagement?
- How much time do the volunteers serving on city commissions, boards and committees spend on public engagement?
- Consider a situation – a policy decision, or a government plan of some kind – where there was little public engagement carried out. Were there any costs – in terms of delays, plans not implemented, misallocations of staff time or stalemates on policy – incurred by government in that situation?

## POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Carry out a ‘public engagement audit’ to determine how much money is spent on this work at City Hall.
- Reach out to other organizations in the community that do public engagement work – school systems, nonprofit organizations, civic groups, local foundations, service clubs, community organizing groups, neighborhood associations – to get a better sense of the money and time they are spending.
- Consider developing a cost-benefit analysis of engagement, by comparing policy decisions and planning processes that featured a high level of engagement with situations where the public was not heavily involved.

