

How effective are your public meetings and other official interactions between citizens and local government?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 2 OF 14**



Cities typically hold a range of meetings to conduct public business. Some are regular monthly proceedings, such as city council and school board meetings, in which the main focus is on decision-making by city officials, with time set aside for comments from the public. Others are events like public hearings and listening sessions in which the focus is on communicating with citizens. Local governments generally do not conduct proactive recruitment for these meetings; citizens find out about them through the local newspaper, by visiting the city web-site or by word of mouth.

In some places, these meetings are a source of frustration for both officials and the public. To local officials, the public seems either angry or absent; most of the time, turnout by citizens is low, and seldom reflects the full diversity of the community. (Officials often refer to the people who regularly attend as “the usual suspects.”) But when a controversial issue or decision on the table, turnout can be very high, with large numbers of frustrated residents. In those cases, the format of a discussion among officials only, followed by an ‘open microphone’ period in which each presenter has an allotted (usually three-minute) time to make comments, seems to ratchet up the level of tension and the potential for conflict.

Local officials often talk more positively about their informal interactions with citizens. Usually these are one-on-one or

small-group conversations in City Hall, in the grocery store, in schools or in other common community settings. “You can’t govern from city hall alone,” says Mike Gibson, Mayor Pro Tem of Carson, California. “I learn a great deal in the local barbershop – that’s where you can find out what people are really thinking and talking about.” Though they have different goals, it may be helpful to compare the main characteristics of these more informal conversations with the features of official public meetings.

Allies on Campus

Academic researchers are increasingly interested in public engagement and participation, and may represent an important resource for local officials. In some cities, college and university professors have worked with local governments on process design, survey design and compilation, the use of online tools, and evaluation of participation activities. Departments of public administration, political science, and communications may be the most likely places to look for potential allies, but professors in other disciplines may also be helpful; consult national academic networks like the Democracy Imperative and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium.

MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT PUBLIC MEETINGS:

- What kinds of official public meetings go on regularly in your city?
- How is recruitment or notification conducted for these meetings?
- What is the typical format for these meetings? Have any official bodies – city council, school board, planning board, human relations commission – experimented with different formats?
- Are you satisfied with the effectiveness of official public meetings? How well do these meetings build trust and help officials make good policy decisions?
- Do you get the sense that the citizens who attend are satisfied with official public meetings?
- Do you meet regularly with citizens in more informal settings? How would you characterize those conversations? How does your experience in those discussions differ from official public proceedings?

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Use a survey to gauge citizens' attitudes toward official public meetings. Do people feel like their voices are heard? Do the meetings build trust? Do citizens think that they lead to better policy decisions?
- Consult NLC's *Beyond Civility: From Public Engagement to Problem Solving* (see Appendix).
- Work with local academic researchers on a survey, focus group, or other research methods that will assess the attitudes of citizens, local officials and city staff toward official public meetings.