

# Have there been any deliberative engagement initiatives, led by local government or by other organizations, recently in your city?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 8 OF 14**



## Groups That Have Led Deliberative Projects

- local governments
- school systems
- community foundations
- interfaith groups, community organizers
- libraries
- youth programs
- chapters of the League of Women Voters
- service clubs
- Chambers of Commerce
- neighborhood associations
- university Cooperative Extension services
- policy advocacy organizations

In many communities, there have been deliberative public engagement initiatives of one kind or another. These efforts are distinguished by the sheer numbers (and diversity) of people they engage, by their emphasis on small-group deliberations and by the amount of time participants spend discussing and acting on public issues; a typical project may involve hundreds of people, each of whom devotes at least several hours of their time. In these initiatives, the participants consider a range of policy options and have the chance to make up their own minds about what should be done.

Local governments have sometimes initiated these kinds of projects, in order to involve citizens in land use decisions, budgeting questions, visioning efforts or other issues. In other places, school systems have engaged residents in questions of school finance or redistricting. Planning departments, police departments, human relations commissions and a whole range of nongovernmental organizations (see box) have worked to involve citizens in one issue or another.

In some cities, a range of governmental and nongovernmental entities have done this kind of intensive public engagement, though for different reasons and with different goals. The history of these efforts is a valuable source of information for you. They may well have been successful at helping the community make important decisions, increasing trust between residents and officials and/or galvanizing citizens to take part in problem-solving.

They may also have raised false expectations, failed to attract a broad range of participants, led to unproductive discussions, or fallen short in other ways. Experiences like these can create bad memories that will make it difficult for local officials to engage citizens in the future. In any case, it is unlikely that you are working with a blank slate: the successes and failures of past public engagement initiatives will affect how people respond to any new plans.

## MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS:

- Were these initiatives successful at attracting participants? How many people participated, and how diverse was the turnout?
- Did these initiatives create reasonable, respectful discussions? Were the meetings facilitated? If so, how? What kinds of group process methods were used?
- Did these initiatives lay out a range of policy options for people to consider, or were they focused on advocating for a particular option or view?
- Did these efforts have online elements, or were they entirely face-to-face?
- Did these initiatives lead to policy changes?
- Were these initiatives successful at encouraging action by citizens and/or organizations outside government?
- Have any of the successful tactics that emerged in temporary engagement efforts been incorporated in the ways that local government operates? (for example, have certain facilitation methods, or recruitments strategies, been adopted for regular use by a city department or some other organization in the community?)
- Who was involved in organizing these initiatives – who are the experienced ‘engagers’ in your community?

## POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Convene the experienced ‘engagers’ in your city to learn more about their efforts.
- Work with a civic group, a local funder, academic researchers, or other local partners to assess the lessons learned from deliberative public engagement efforts in your city.

## Deliberating with Citizens to Plan and Act

Decatur Roundtables

Decatur, Georgia (pop. 18,900)

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In 2010, the city of Decatur established a broad-based deliberative process, called Decatur Next, to develop the city's strategic plan for the next decade. They drew on lessons learned from the last planning process – the Decatur Round Tables of 2000 – and added a number of innovative online elements. The Decatur Next website incorporated video testimonials and allows citizens to review and discuss elements of the plan.

Starting in April 2010, more than 1,500 Decatur residents met in deliberative small groups to identify key concerns and pose crucial questions about the next ten years of community life in Decatur. Four broad principles were established from this process: Manage growth while retaining character; encourage a diverse and engaged community; serve as good stewards of the environment and community resources; and support a safe, healthy, life-long community.

In March 2011, Decatur's City Commission unanimously adopted the 2010 Strategic Plan. The implementation of the plan calls for significant effort from the city, citizen boards, non-profits and individuals over the next decade in order to help Decatur achieve its vision.