

Beginning Your Planning Process

Developing Shared Civic Infrastructure

FORMING A TEAM OF PLANNING PARTNERS

The planning process is not an individual task or a City Hall exercise. It is an explicitly collaborative process, because a healthy local democracy benefits everyone, and is the responsibility of everyone. Local government and city leaders should not try to bear all the burdens or make all the decisions. Rather, long-term public engagement planning is a shared endeavour, and your first key task is assembling an inclusive list of local leaders you will invite to work with you as planning partners.

Your planning partners should understand that they are not being invited merely as advisors to local government; you are asking not only for “buy-in,” but for “weigh-in” from leaders who can help direct, implement and evaluate elements of the plan. The process will help form an alliance of leaders and organizations to support and sustain local democracy.

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.”

The process will be more productive if it includes a range of people who have various kinds of stake in the community and experience with public engagement. Some key leaders to consider are:

- Local officials (the mayor, city manager or administrator, key council members);
- School administrators, school board members, principals or other representatives from the school system;
- Representatives from community foundations or other local funders;
- Neighborhood leaders;
- Business leaders;
- Police officials;
- Leaders of formal or informal immigrant groups;
- Faith leaders;
- Representatives from youth councils or other youth leadership programs; and
- Representatives of other key civic organizations.

In addition to traditional leaders, consider partners who may be influential non-traditional leaders — especially people who have experience engaging citizens in public problem-solving. Some possibilities are:

- Leaders of interfaith groups;
- Community organizers;
- Library administrators;
- Representatives of service clubs;
- Administrators and faculty members of local colleges and universities;
- Staff of university cooperative extension services;
- Hospital administrators and staff;
- Local bloggers and online activists; and
- Policy advocates.

As you compile an invite list, keep your eye on the diversity of the group. One of the keys to effective democratic governance is the ability to reach out and involve every segment of the community, including people whose voices have been marginalized or who simply haven’t been directly engaged in the past. For the planning group, you need people who represent different racial and ethnic groups, different age groups, recent immigrant communities and other key segments of the population.

As the group begins to meet, it is important to ask “Who is not here who needs to be here?” Challenge the group to keep thinking about diversity and representation.

DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE PLANNING PROCESS

As you develop your list of potential partners, it is important to think through the format and facilitation of the planning meetings themselves. This guide is structured so that it can be easily converted into meeting agendas; Appendix 1 contains some suggestions for how to do that, along with other process tips.

An experienced facilitator can be invaluable for helping you navigate a planning process. You will probably need one facilitator for every 8-10 planning team members. The role of the facilitator in the meetings should be to help the group use the written materials, to help them set and keep ground rules and to monitor the time.

A word of caution: having a city leader or city staffer serve as a facilitator may not be the optimal use of his or her expertise, and may create additional complications. Facilitators should focus on the process rather than contributing their own opinions and ideas. If possible, find a facilitator who has some experience with this role.

BRINGING EVERYONE UP TO SPEED

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public provides questions that city leaders might ask about their community in order to take stock of local democracy. Think about how to summarize and transmit the answers you have gathered. This information can be shared with your partners in a number of different formats, from short verbal presentations and PowerPoint slides to full research reports. Assemble the material you have, provide short, plain-language summaries of any longer or more academically worded reports and provide a brief summary of the overall conclusions. At least some of this material might also be shared online with the full community.

One realization you are likely to make is that your community already has at least some of the elements it needs to create a stronger local democracy. Some of these building blocks may need to be expanded, more broadly supported or connected to other assets. Other components may be present, but underutilized — for example, almost every city has schools, libraries and other physical spaces with the potential to be dynamic hubs for local engagement. Still other assets may need a higher level of support and assistance and would benefit even more from being part of a more concerted plan for civic infrastructure. Neighborhood associations, block clubs and homeowner's associations often fall into this category, since they are driven by citizen energy and expertise but still, for one reason or another, aren't sufficiently inclusive, participatory or effective. Finally, there are likely to be gaps in your existing civic infrastructure that might be filled by new programs or initiatives.

SUMMARIZING KEY LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

There are also some overall lessons to be learned from the public engagement efforts that have emerged over the last 20 years. Some of these findings may reflect the experience of your city, while others may be less familiar.

The most successful engagement initiatives seem to follow these four strategies:

1. They assemble a large and diverse “critical mass” of citizens (or in some cases, a smaller, demographically representative set of people, intended to serve as a proxy for the larger population). To achieve this kind of mass participation, organizers map out and connect with a wide variety of organizations and networks,

weaving together the strands of a large web of existing relationships, so that potential participants are recruited by people they already know and trust.

2. They involve those citizens in structured, facilitated small-group discussions, interspersed with large forums for amplifying shared conclusions and moving from talk to action. These have traditionally been face-to-face meetings, but increasingly they are being held online, and other online tools are being used to inform and complement them. A combination of face-to-face and online communication seems to be the best approach.
3. They give the participants in these meetings the opportunity to compare values and experiences, and to consider a range of views and policy options. This allows people of different opinions to decide together what they think should be done about a public issue.
4. They are intended to produce tangible actions and outcomes. There is some variation here: some efforts focus on applying citizen input to policy and planning decisions, while others also seek to effect change at other levels, including changes within organizations and institutions, actions driven by small groups of people, individual volunteerism and changes in attitude and behavior.

MYTHS ABOUT DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

It is also important to recognize that city leaders, other leaders, local government employees and citizens themselves all bring their own expectations and assumptions into any discussion of public engagement. Anticipating and working through these assumptions may be critical, especially in the early stages of your planning process.

Public officials and other leaders often bring assumptions about power — specifically that engaging and, to some extent, “empowering” citizens can reduce the power and authority of officials. Leaders will rarely voice these concerns, especially in public settings, but they are nonetheless real. The question of how engagement affects power is complicated; one frequent occurrence in public engagement projects is that citizen participants ask public officials for a clearer sense of their role and their formal or informal legitimacy. However, it is quite common to hear experienced officials say that through these initiatives, they “gave up some power in order to generate more power.”

Local government employees sometimes voice a related assumption: that engaging citizens in decision-making and problem-solving may somehow make government superfluous. This concern by people inside government usually comes as a surprise to those outside; in fact, one of the effects of proactive public engagement seems to be that citizens gain a stronger sense of the difficult decisions that public managers face, the commitment and expertise of public employees and the important roles being played by government.

One expectation that citizens often bring to this work is that getting involved in a democratic governance initiative will be a formal, contentious and purely political activity. One of the most common results described in evaluations of these projects is that the participants actually enjoyed the experience. On post-surveys, they often name learning, relationship-building and an increased sense of belonging to community as their most valued outcomes of the process.

Local officials sometimes come into office assuming that they have a “blank slate” to work from in their efforts to engage different segments of the community — that the history or even the current practices of discrimination will not affect their ability to engage the public. But history matters, and in most cities, the history of the relationship between City Hall and citizens includes a great deal of inequality and mistrust. Race is the most common and probably the most significant dividing line in local politics, but other kinds of differences (ethnicity, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, age group, legal citizenship status, newcomers vs. old-timers) can also be critical. What happened in the past, and how people feel they have been treated in the past, will affect how they interact with local officials in the present.

Furthermore, biases and patterns of discrimination may be just as strong today as they were in the past. Local officials are faced with three facets of racism, religious bigotry and other “isms”: the historical damage they have done, the current damage they may be causing and people’s perceptions about being ignored or excluded. All three can have a major impact on the relationship between government and citizens, and all three must be considered in any conversation about public engagement. Communities need to deal with the painful aspects of their history, they need to address current inequalities and they need to be able to communicate across their differences.

Leaders of groups and organizations outside government often expect that public engagement is the sole responsibility of government, and that their primary role is representing their members.

In fact, for engagement to work (especially over the long term), non-governmental leaders must take shared ownership, particularly for bringing their members to the table.

Leaders, public employees and citizens alike seem to expect that engagement is extremely time-consuming, mainly because it requires more work to set up meetings and recruit participants. This expectation is difficult to assess, since it is relative — depending on the circumstances, not engaging the public can lead to a much longer, more drawn-out and contentious process. But in any case, one of the main reasons that some communities are thinking about stronger engagement infrastructure is that it promises to make working with citizens faster and easier: if citizens are already at least somewhat “mobilized,” and connected with government, the work of

mobilizing and connecting around a particular issue or decision doesn’t have to start from scratch.

Public officials and employees often assume that engagement is useful mainly as a better way of making public decisions. In fact, there seem to be other benefits of democratic governance — not only the “softer” effects on citizens (mentioned above), but more tangible and even measurable effects on trust in government, attachment to community, and even economic vitality. Some researchers now suggest that generalized feelings of engagement with a city have a statistically significant impact on local economic growth.

In a similar vein, local leaders usually treat the work of engagement as a matter of tools and methods — they adopt a situation-based approach, in which the public is only present when a crisis has occurred or a critical decision must be made. But while engagement is often successful in those situations, it seldom seems to help the community meet similar challenges in the future. Temporary engagement doesn’t seem to be sufficiently satisfying, game-changing, or meaningful either to the “engagers” or the “engaged.” It is also extremely difficult, mainly because the recruitment effort must start from the beginning every time. Occasional engagement often leads to improved policies, decisions, and problem-solving, but it may not improve governance, especially over the long term.

At the same time, it is unrealistic to expect citizens to be “engaged” — at least in the way we have been doing and defining engagement — all the time. Most people are too busy to be involved in anything that doesn’t relate directly to work or family obligations. They are not interested in the vast majority of the decisions made by public officials, other local leaders or by frontline public employees. When citizens are engaged in a more sustained, long-term community structure or activity, it is usually because there are a range of reasons to be involved, such as the chance to socialize with neighbors, the opportunity to focus on children and young people, or the prospect of enjoying music and food.

Overcoming this challenge, and creating a framework for engagement that meets the needs and goals of both leaders and citizens, is the central question of long-term democratic governance planning.

