

# Public Engagement

Public engagement is the organized, interactive partnership between a government and its citizens. Citizen participation fosters a sense of ownership, increasing the level of investment in a program's successful outcome. An inclusive approach to policymaking utilizes the broad diversity of ideas and abilities a population offers. It anticipates roadblocks, allowing for proactive, constructive solutions.

Solutions can come from many places, but smart communities realize that engaging the broad public in the planning and place-making process leads to better answers and a deeper public ownership of our future. Faced with this knowledge, communities are struggling to develop new and innovative public engagement methods, including those that embrace new technologies, social media, and collaborative design methods, to better bring the public into conversations on the future of city life.



## Benefits of Public Engagement

The positive outcomes of constructive collaboration are numerous, and far outweigh the potential challenges of coordinating such an effort. Not only are the chances better for program success, but residents' investment will strengthen the future health of the community. Among the additional benefits are:

**New Ideas** - Some of the best new ideas are generated in a local participatory setting. Soliciting a variety of perspectives can generate original and numerous solutions.

**Customized Solutions** - Input from a broader cross-section of stakeholders allows for a fuller understanding of community-specific issues. Their on-the-ground perspective can provide a reality check for which ideas are most likely to work and which are not. Policies and their execution can then be tailored to fit the area's particular resources, skill sets, and population size and culture.

**Conflict Prevention** - Giving stakeholders the opportunity for up-front involvement can help prevent potentially serious conflicts from arising later. Problems can be addressed proactively, avoiding emotionally-charged, damaging situations.

**Positive Environment** - Residents who are invested in shaping their community report a higher level of satisfaction with where they live. Involvement in local government can empower citizens, create a sense of belonging, foster an atmosphere of excitement and improve residents' confidence in their government.

**Access to Information** - As community involvement increases, information about resources and opportunities will circulate more widely, reaching more people.

**Relationship-building** - Face-to-face involvement is an excellent way for local governments and stakeholders to gather valuable information and hold each other accountable for intended progress. Local governments will be in a position to better understand the complex issues in the communities they serve, and citizens will be in a position to better understand the processes of government, including the demands on city funds and staff.

# Tell, Ask, Dialogue, Collaborate

A growing number of planners have started to think about public engagement as comprising a range of potential strategies that build on each other. The aim is to create a more comprehensive and useful conception of public engagement with the framework of: *Tell, Ask, Dialogue, Collaborate*.

**Tell.** We are *Telling* something to the public when we give them information. We tend to do this more than anything else ~ partly because we are dealing with complex issues and want people to know at least some of what we know, and partly because it's easier to *Tell* than to engage people in figuring out what the information means and why it matters. When the goal is to get information to people, *Telling* is the quickest way to do it, but it's also the least effective - people retain only a small proportion of what they hear or read, especially compared to their retention and comprehension when they have actually worked with the information themselves.

**Ask.** We also *Ask* people for their opinions or experiences a lot. *Asking* is an information-seeking activity—it's trying to uncover facts that we can use to make a better-informed decision. *Asking* is a fundamentally extractive process - we are getting something we need out of the person we are *Asking*. Just like we need people to have information to work with, we also need to know what they're thinking. The problem is that *Asking*, like *Telling*, is at best an incomplete part of what we need. Members of the public have the benefit of expressing their opinions, but it's a limited benefit. The public has no control over what we do with their feedback. If they end up thinking that we misunderstood or ignored their feedback, they are likely to conclude that we wasted their time.

**Dialogue.** *Dialogue* is a method for not just building up a body of facts, but creating shared understanding among a group of people. A *Dialogue* can involve a review of factual information, sharing of opinions, and/or review of alternative options. The critical element is that all of the participants in a *Dialogue* participate. No one is passive in a dialogue. If people are listening but not speaking, they are an audience to the *Dialogue*, and thus not part of the *Dialogue* at all. *Dialogue* also requires a different skill set from simple *Telling* or *Asking* - and it's also more difficult. A successful *Dialogue* requires a structure for *Telling* and *Asking*, as well as listening and questioning. In a *Dialogue*, people are engaged in thinking, not just stating an inflexible position. Trying out different ideas and reconsidering opinions are a key part of the process.

**Collaborate.** *Collaboration* should be the ultimate goal of our planning efforts. When we make a plan, review a proposed development, or discuss changes to regulations, we know that what we do impacts other agencies, organizations, businesses, and people who are trying to support the community. Sometimes we overlook a key opportunity: the chance to use our planning work as a means of building a meaningful *collaboration*. *Collaboration*-building falls within the fundamental mission of most planning commissions ~ to support the quality of life of their communities. If we design our public engagement to build *Collaboration*, we can do more to make the entire community better.



Sources: National League of Cities, Planetizen, Institute for Local Government, Sustainable Cities Initiative, American Planning Association

**CENTRE REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY**  
2643 GATEWAY DRIVE  
STATE COLLEGE, PA 16801  
(814) 231-3050