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Building Common Ground: Public Engagement, Promising Practices

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Building Common Ground: Public Engagement, Promising Practices

Abstract

With increasing frequency, people in both the government and civic spheres are asked to find and use evidence-based solutions for community problems: solutions that have been proven to produce effective results. Public sector employees often lack the resources and time to mine for promising practices to address challenges their cities and towns are facing. In response to this need, Fels Research & Consulting Group created the Promising Practice series, which compiles public sector solutions on timely subjects in accessible reports. This report is the fourth in the Promising Practices series.

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BUILDING
COMMON GROUND

Public Engagement *Promising Practices*

Fels Institute
of Government
UNIVERSITY *of* PENNSYLVANIA

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About the Fels Institute of Government

The Fels Institute of Government is the University of Pennsylvania's graduate program in public policy and public management. Fels was founded in 1937 by entrepreneur and philanthropist Samuel Simeon Fels in response to a wave of corruption and mismanagement in Pennsylvania government. Originally established for the purpose of training local government officials, over time Fels broadened its mission; it now prepares its students for public leadership positions in city, state, and Federal agencies, elective politics, nonprofit organizations, and private firms with close connections to the public sector. Its 1,800 living alumni work in leadership roles across the U.S. and around the world.

Fels Research & Consulting marries the rich assets of Penn and the Fels Institute of Government with the expertise of seasoned professionals and the talent and creativity of high caliber graduate students to tackle challenging and innovative projects related to public policy and public management. We work with governments, public institutions, civic groups, and nonprofits to enhance their effectiveness and impact.

For over 70 years, Fels has worked hand in hand with clients at the local, state and national level on over 1,400 projects to strengthen the impact of the public sector. Our work is built on a foundation of Promising Practices –actions, programs, or processes that lead to effective and productive results in a given situation. Several times a year the team focuses on breaking developments in areas of interest to public sector leaders and managers.

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The Promising Practices Series

With increasing frequency, people in both the government and civic spheres are asked to find and use evidence-based solutions for community problems: solutions that have been proven to produce effective results. Public sector employees often lack the resources and time to mine for promising practices to address challenges their cities and towns are facing. In response to this need, Fels Research & Consulting Group created the Promising Practice series, which compiles public sector solutions on timely subjects in accessible reports. This report is the fourth in the Promising Practices series.

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FOREWORD

In these politically and economically polarizing times, promoting effective "public engagement" may sometimes seem hopelessly naive. Our political leaders are sharply divided and unwilling to compromise. The news media glorifies extremist rhetoric and incivility at the expense of thoughtful and constructive dialogue. Ordinary Americans are increasingly afraid to share their honest views and disagreements for fear of getting verbally, and even physically, attacked in response. Why waste our time with "public engagement?"

Yet, it is precisely at this time that the need for public engagement is greatest. It is up to each of us to resist the temptations of civic despair and withdrawal from the public realm. Only if we find new ways to open ourselves to the voices of those with views differing from our own—and help them to hear our own voices in return—can we hope to emerge from this new "era of bad feelings." Without deliberate effort to expose ourselves to contrasting perspectives and opinions, the fabric of our democracy will surely unravel.

This Promising Practices brief, researched and compiled by the University of Pennsylvania's Fels Institute of Government, in partnership with the Penn Project for Civic Engagement, provides a roadmap on how to build a more engaged and deliberative society. It is a pragmatic guide, based in both scholarly research and practical expertise, for fostering public engagement in the interest of community problem-solving. It places a powerful set of tools into the hands of public officials, civic leaders, and engaged citizens to better our communities by opening up the public space for productive conversations.

Written for local leaders in the public sector, this report takes the reader through several differing styles of public engagement (with emphasis on the deliberative engagement model). It explains the reasons behind and benefits of public engagement activities, and it describes best practices for organizing and conducting effective public engagement sessions.

This Promising Practices brief is itself a collaboration among different Penn students, faculty, staff, programs, and academic departments, as well as national institutions. It reflects Penn's commitment—so well exemplified by the Fels Institute of Government—to embrace local and global engagement, one of the core tenants of the Penn Compact. It reaffirms the vision of Penn's founder, Benjamin Franklin, who argued that "true merit" consists in integrating knowledge, theory, and practice to better humanity. These are valuable lessons for all of us to learn and use as our local, national, and global communities are continually reshaped in the years to come.

Ben would be proud.

Dr. Amy Gutmann *is President of the University of Pennsylvania and Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of Political Science. An eminent political scientist and philosopher, she also holds secondary faculty appointments in Philosophy, the Annenberg School for Communication, and the Graduate School of Education. Dr. Gutmann has authored and edited 15 books, including* The Spirit of Compromise: Why Governing Demands It and Campaigning Undermines It *(forthcoming, Spring 2012),* Why Deliberative Democracy? *(2004, with Dennis Thompson),* Identity in Democracy *(2003),* Democratic Education *(1999, revised edition),* Democracy and Disagreement *(1996, with Dennis Thompson), and* Color Conscious *(1996, with K. Anthony Appiah). She has published more than 100 articles, essays, and book chapters, and she continues to teach and write on ethics and public policy, democracy, and education.*

What do community leaders need to know if they want to productively engage the public in making policies and carrying them out?

Three Public Sector Scenarios:

1. Solidifying the Budget:

It's budget time, and the economic outlook is bleak. The state hasn't given you the numbers yet, but it's clear they'll be cutting aid to all municipalities. As your town's chief executive, you've been meeting with key staff to figure out how to deal with the shortfall. Cut programs? Which ones? Raise taxes? On what? You've asked departments for budget cuts of 10 percent, 20 percent and 30 percent—what they'd cut at each level and what affect it would have. Now, you and your team have tough choices to make, choices that will affect the residents of your town in different ways. And the decision is ultimately yours. At the end of the meeting, two of your staff suggest holding a new kind of public meeting about the budget—not just a meeting where you present the budget, but one where you seek citizen input. How much pain would they be willing to share? Which cuts would they most strongly oppose?

As you walk back to your office, you wonder: Can the public really give thoughtful input? How would such input be structured? Do they know enough to be helpful? How would we frame the questions? Would I have to listen to them? Can we get diverse opinions, or only those from one political position? What outcomes might we expect? How would I protect myself against an angry group of advocates?

2. Improving Infrastructure:

As the borough manager, you run a tight ship. You are on top of your staff's work, the condition of the community's infrastructure and the residents' needs. You report regularly to the mayor and to the borough council, and they've been happy with your ability to work with an increasingly tight budget. The town center is the heart of the community, and it's known regionally as a nice place to shop. But sidewalk upgrades and other efforts to revitalize the town center are generating opposition. Some people are all for it, but others are afraid it will destroy the town's quaint feel. The mayor thinks that it might be good to have some community conversations about the direction the town is taking. But you worry that such conversations would make the polarization worse.

The mayor understands your concerns but has nonetheless asked that you look into whether you can engage the community without generating more heat than light. What models are out there? Who would run the meetings? How much would they cost? How would they be structured? Would we get valuable input?

3. Improving Facilities:

You are the CEO of the region's premier performing arts center—a new, state-of-the-art facility housing two beautiful performance venues and an indoor "public square" under one roof. People who attend events at the center love it. When they come for the first time, they are awed by the structure. The indoor "public square" was initially designed to be an active public square. And yet, it is empty during the day. Even on performance nights, the space is only active as people come and go. The "square" is clearly not meeting the intended purpose. Funders wonder what it would take to activate the space and make it livelier more often.

You and your staff discuss this situation. The staff seems as mystified as you are. Brainstorming doesn't yield ideas that seem promising until someone suggests asking the people who use the space what it would take to get them there more often and to bring others in. Clearly, they are suggesting more than a typical survey. It sounds like a good idea, but how to do it? Could public engagement provide useful insights? How much would it cost? How would we get the public to participate?

> Civic engagement for me as a city manager is a different approach to the way that we manage communities. The old-school fashion that I was brought up in was "government makes the best decisions for the people." I think that civic engagement has taken us away from that model to one of a partnership between residents, community and local government, and this partnership creates opportunities for dialogue and conversation about public policy issues, about programs and services, and other kinds of issues or problems that confront a community. —Pat Martel, *Manager, Daly City, CA*
>
> *Pearce and Pierce, p. 3*

This "Promising Practices" brief addresses these kinds of public leadership challenges, in which public engagement can play a useful role. This guide will help make sure good intentions about engaging the public are complemented by strong processes to meet those intentions. It will address the questions posed in the scenarios above, and many more.

Executive Summary

In the summer of 2009, when Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius held "town hall forums" on health care, we saw the disastrous results that can emerge when good intentions of public engagement are coupled with bad process: shouting and general chaos, disrespect and polarization. Yet communities around the country, and around the globe, have found ways to hold public meetings that are productive, build more support than criticism and produce useful action rather than destructive arguments.

The challenges public leaders face are significant, especially in the current economic and polarized political climate. Engaging the community is an important tool for public employees to clear hurdles toward policy development and the completion of projects. Additionally, it can help public servants decide how best to serve their constituents and how initiatives should be prioritized.

In order to properly use public engagement, it is important to get past the buzz words and delve into the "whys and hows" of this powerful tool. To effectively include the public in decision making and municipal projects, public employees must combat the socioeconomic and cultural fragmentation, age diversity, and personality differences that make discussion and finding common ground difficult. These inherent hurdles, coupled with contentious issues such as taxes or service cuts, create barriers toward productive conversation that are difficult to surmount.

The Promising Practices outlined in this report are meant to anticipate and offer practical, easily implemented solutions to overcoming these challenges. Illustrated with real-life examples, the discussion offers clear and specific reasons as to why public engagement is essential today, what outcomes can be achieved through public engagement practices, and step-by-step guidelines on how to launch, manage and utilize public engagement events.

Engaging the public covers a variety of practices—from town hall meetings to public forums, from expert presentations to raucous events where people stand in line to voice complains and concerns, but rarely a compliment. This report identifies three key functions of public engagement: (1) distribution of information from public sector representatives and institutions to their constituents; (2) the acquisition of feedback from individual citizens to their public servants; and (3) engagement, or deliberative engagement, among citizens and public leaders. While all three types of public engagement are explored in this brief, the most dynamic (and most challenging to organize and execute) type of public engagement, deliberative engagement, will be discussed in-depth.

THIS BRIEF OFFERS GUIDANCE SURROUNDING:

- Who should lead engagement sessions;
- Skills needed by meeting facilitators ;
- Necessary preparation and internal capacity;
- Neutrality and issue framing;
- How to ensure transparency;
- Ground rules for civil discussion;
- Communication outreach strategies; and
- Sample costs and budgets.

Increasingly, social media plays a vital role in engaging the public and soliciting feedback. Social media and its role in public engagement are not thoroughly explored in this brief, though its importance is acknowledged. A wide and complex issue in and of itself, social media and the public sector is explored in the Fels Promising Practices report titled, "Making the Most of Social Media" (2009). An update to this report will be published in the Spring of 2012. Please check our publications page (www.fels.upenn.edu/Consulting-Publications) for its release.

To develop this report, data was drawn from nine phone interviews and a survey of more than 60 practitioners of public engagement projects at the local government level across the country. Surveys were disseminated to the National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation network as well as to a group of local government contacts in the Fels Institute's Promising Practices network. Interviews were held with a subset of the same group. A complete methodology is available in Appendix A.

What Is Public Engagement?

Popular concepts have the tendency to become buzzwords overtime. This has happened with "public engagement;" the term is used to refer to many different things and as a result, loses meaning. For some people, public engagement includes a wide range of "engagement" activities—from volunteering and community service to voting and political campaigning to town hall meetings and community problem-solving.

Here, we focus on the political and policy-related aspects of public engagement initiated by government bodies. For the purpose of this report, the definition of public engagement is a set of participatory processes, including dialogue, deliberation and policy making, between those who develop and implement policies and those whom the policies and programs are designed to serve.

In this context, public engagement is a way to turn a mass of individuals into a group of public citizens. Public engagement can take many forms such as public meetings for a school board or town council, legislative hearings, and political rallies. There are two main ways to structure public engagement meetings. One common approach is a presentation followed by a Q&A session. The presentation is often delivered by an expert or panel of experts. Another approach involves a presentation followed by breakout sessions led by moderators where participants talk directly with one other. The audience is divided into small groups to work through a set of issues to reach common ground.

Here are four interesting models referenced in our interviews:

- Residents of Portsmouth, NH came together to form Portsmouth Listens and engaged in two-hour discussion over a number of weeks to "shape the future of the city. What started as a grass roots citizen effort . . . has grown into a partnership between volunteers and the city."

- 3,500 people from across the country gave input to the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform as a part of the national Our Budget, Our Economy project of AmericaSpeaks.

- Residents developed values-based criteria for the City budget during the Tight Times, Tough Choices public budget workshops in Philadelphia. The mayor responded by saying which criteria he had used and how he used them.

- Citizen input, collected through surveys and deliberate forums during the community budgeting process in Menlo Park, CA, determined how much funding programs would receive.

The style of engagement affects the results of the session. Your choice of engagement style will depend on a variety of factors that are discussed in later sections. Before choosing the *style* of engagement you want, identify the *purpose* of the session in terms of the result you want to achieve.

EXPERT ADVICE:
HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT?

1. Patty Dineen, webmaster for the National Issues Forum Institute and leader of community forums in Pittsburgh, PA, says: "Opening or maximizing communication between the public and experts, leaders, or policy makers for the purposes of public problem-solving."

2. Larry Schooler, manager of community engagement and public participation projects associated with urban planning for the City of Austin (TX), says: "I would define it as a vital and integral element of democracy. It has been given different levels of value by different cities and states and agencies, and so I think virtually everyone who does this work defines it in different ways. I define it as a multi-channel, multi-opportunity, multi-pronged effort to connect citizens with public policy discussions.

As a public sector administrator, there are a number of reasons you might want to create public engagement forums for your community, the most common being:

- **Involve the public in decision-making.**
  Public engagement is a way to develop structured and deliberative input from a diverse group of people in order to develop effective policy projects. The public is then directly involved and – more importantly – considers themselves involved in decision-making.

- **Proactively identify concerns.**
  Traditional public forums such as town hall meetings tend to be a setting where citizens air their grievances and concerns, which can be an essential aspect of public participation. Early engagement will allow public administrators the time to integrate such concerns before project or policy details are too far along. This may mean less resistance during later stages of the policy or project development process.

- **Foster understanding among different groups.**
  Public engagement can preempt the expected response of special interest or advocacy groups and individuals who tend to be highly visible attendees at traditional public forums. We can and should structure public engagement sessions so that those individuals move beyond stating their positions (often loudly and strongly worded) to discussing the interests that underlie those positions. Well-structured public engagement sessions encourage participants to listen and respond respectfully, if passionately, to folks with different positions and ideas. They may not wind up agreeing with one another, but they will at least understand one another, and they will uncover areas of agreement amid the disagreement. These areas of agreement provide language and leverage for public leaders as they develop and carry out public policy.

Pearce and Pearce note that the dominant narrative of government/citizen relationships is that government is a "vending machine" providing outstanding service. One of the unfortunate effects of this model is that it transforms "citizens" into "consumers." To drive the point home, they note that public administrators are the vending machine in this story. When someone puts their money into a vending machine and it doesn't give what they wanted, they kick the machine. Public administrators get "kicked" all the time, because "the public has been taught that government is a service-provider, and when it doesn't provide the services they want, they feel entitled to kick you. And who taught them to think that way about government? We did, when we took on the 'consumer satisfaction' model. It's time to do something different."

Pearce and Pearce, 2010, p. 9

- **Develop public support.**
  Public engagement is a way to generate public and, in turn, political will. We know that people tend to support what they help to create. This means that when people come together and find common ground, they generate the energy and the will to support putting their ideas into practice.

- **Increase understanding of trade-offs.**
  Most participants walk into public engagement forums with a set of beliefs or positions on the issue at hand. They know what they think and they know what they want. Rarely do they understand the issue's complexity or its implications for other people. More rarely have they thought about possible inconsistencies in their own positions. For example, they may want both increased or improved public services and lower taxes. Deliberative public forums increase understanding by helping people see the complexities of the issue, as well as the trade-offs they and others may have to make.

- **Develop a set of citizen priorities for addressing the issue.**
  As participants' understanding deepens and they work through the trade-offs and tensions in the issue, they start to make choices about what they are and are not willing to do. These choices can be seen as their priorities for addressing the issue at hand.

- **Create a set of value-based principles for how to address the issue.**
  As participants make choices and trade-offs, the moderators ask why they are making those choices and trade-offs rather than others. The "why" is always a set of values or principles that people hold; these values and principles are, in fact, the basis for the common ground they reach. Public leaders can use these values-based principles as criteria for explaining their policies and actions.

As a public leader, you can use the outcomes from deliberative forums to demonstrate your responsiveness to the public will. The results of the public engagement initiative can give you language for discussing issues and policies. You can refer to the values-based principles and priorities from the deliberative forums as part of your reasoning in decision-making. Even when you cannot implement a priority or principle, you can acknowledge that it exists and say what you are doing instead and why, perhaps referring to another principle as justification.

The Pennsylvania Project for Civic Engagement (PPCE) provided an extremely valuable service to the Zoning Code Commission (ZCC) in the winter of 2010, helping bring together divergent views and developing common ground on a highly divisive issue—the question of how developers and community organizations communicate with each other about development projects. . . . The common ground achieved through this project will continue to serve as a blueprint for guiding how the development community and civic associations communicate and interact with each other for years to come. —Eva Gladstein, *Executive Director, Zoning Code Commission*

The "Tight Times, Tough Choices" workshops about the city's budget [helped] citizens understand the impact of the global economy on the local budget and the trade-offs we are facing. . . . The city used feedback gained from the workshops to help it manage its way out of the budget crisis. —Camille Cates Barnett, Ph.D., *Managing Director, City of Philadelphia*

CREATE A SET OF VALUE-BASED PRINCIPLES FOR HOW TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE

INVOLVE THE PUBLIC IN DECISION-MAKING

DEVELOP PUBLIC SUPPORT

PROACTIVELY IDENTIFY CONCERNS

DEVELOP A SET OF CITIZEN PRIORITIES FOR ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

INCREASE UNDERSTANDING OF TRADE-OFFS

FOSTER UNDERSTANDING AMONG DIFFERENT GROUPS

With a better understanding of your underlying reasons for creating public engagement sessions, you'll be better able to produce clear outcomes from public engagement. Three fundamental outcomes achieved by public engagement are:

1. Informing the Public

The chief value of public sessions with this purpose is the communication of professional expertise – from the officeholder, appointed staff or outside professional experts. Information sessions are based on the belief that information is the key to public learning and that the public will make up its mind once it has all the relevant information, and that will lead to public support. Here, the role of public leaders is to make sure that the public gets the information it "needs" (based on what experts say) and that there is a balanced representation of opposing views to help the public learn.

This sort of public engagement includes school board and town council meetings, public information sessions, panel presentations, lectures, and town hall meetings. Often these are meetings in which official bodies do their business in public, as well as forums and press conferences where officials present or argue for their policies or announce new programs. Experts may be invited to explain the specific issues around which policies are being developed.

EXAMPLE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TO HEAR FROM THE PUBLIC

Sacha Ramirez Francis of the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community describes the League of Women Voter Town Hall Meeting on the controversial CO2 sequestration project (injecting carbon dioxide into oil fields to enhance oil recovery and reduce CO2 emissions). "Our county was embroiled in the debate concerning the planned CO2 sequestration project that had been developing without public awareness or approval for some years. Private entities were working with a few commissioners behind closed doors on a deal that turned out to be soundly rejected by local residents. We tried to sidestep the anger by bringing people together to discuss what rights are afforded to citizens in regards to the disclosure of information. The local opposition group, Citizens Against CO2 Sequestration, had basically threatened to block any event the League of Women Voters would host that represented favorable views of the process—even if in the name of balanced information.. We pushed forward with the open meeting, and used a basic Q & A format with a panel of presenters well-versed in the laws that provide for access and openness in government."

2. Acquiring Public Feedback

Engagement to acquire feedback is not a discussion, but rather a one-way transmission of the public's opinions and concerns about an issue. Rarely does the interaction go as far as to probe tensions or trade-offs underlying the issue or proposed policy at hand. Rarer still are hearings in which participants are asked to confront and work through the tough choices that must be made in most public policy work.

Public officials often create opportunities to hear from the public and get their input. Public comment opportunities at school board meetings and at town and city council meetings are two such examples. Many states have laws requiring school boards to provide opportunities for residents and other stakeholders to speak. Question-and-answer sessions during public comment assemblies are typically held for clarification so that the elected official is clear on what the stakeholder is expressing.

Open legislative hearings are structured to get testimony from the entire constituency, including specific segments of the public that are usually not well represented. It is not unusual, for example, for state committees to go from city to city holding hearings and inviting representatives of different groups to appear and give formal input.

"The more purely technical decisions are more likely handled by staff; if it's a more value-based decision, then we want the community involved in that process." —*Menlo Park Civic Engagement Manager*

Keidan and Amsler, 2010, p. 15

COMMUNITY POLICING FORUM: COMMON GOOD COLLABORATIVE

American Leadership Forum (ALF) —Silicon Valley created its 'Safer San Jose' initiative in response to growing tension between police and parts of the community. The initiative fosters a more productive relationship between police and residents.

For a year, the desire for community policing had been evident. But it wasn't clear whether all parties agreed on what to expect of community policing. In October 2010, ALF held a community dialogue exploring this topic.

The event featured two fishbowl dialogues. Instead of a panel, guests sat facing one another and had a conversation rather than simply responding in turn to directed questions. This format allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the topic and the various perspectives surrounding the issue and helped build relationships among participants.

The event provided a great deal of information about community policing practices, myths, and opportunities. However, the topic proved too large to come to any definitive conclusions after one dialogue. ALF will keep working to develop clarity in this area.

3. Building Common Ground

The purpose of deliberative engagement is to enable both the public and policy makers to develop common ground around an issue or policy decision. Deliberative engagement is a process that is transparent, open to all groups and produces a collective judgment about the issue at hand. Individual interests are voiced and confronted with competing perspectives. The deliberative process allows people, through civil discussion, to gain understanding outside of their perspective. Participants are able to work through differences and, in doing so, grapple with tensions among perspectives and options and deliberate about the trade-offs to see which they are and are not willing to make.

Deliberative engagement works best when it marries professional expertise with the values, opinions and backgrounds of affected citizens. Professionals may be experts on the facts around an issue—but they can, and often do, differ on which facts are important, how to present facts and whether something is, indeed, a fact. The public provides valuable perspective on issue priorities and fact interpretation – that is, on which facts the public thinks are most important in this context and why.

The goal of deliberative engagement is to reach some kind of **common ground** on which to base action. Common ground goes beyond ordinary compromise. Many, if not most, compromises are reached by a process of mutual concession-making until the parties come to an agreement that is least objectionable to all. In the deliberative process of reaching common ground, people are able to figure out what they share (usually values or goals) and build on that to reach agreement. Yes, there are still trade-offs, but people make those trade-offs based on where they agree, not as the result of making concessions.

EXAMPLES OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TO LEARN FROM AND WITH THE PUBLIC

Martha McCoy, executive director of Everyday Democracy, describes the Communities Creating Racial Equity project: "A three-year project (with support from Everyday Democracy) that included eight communities across the country who were working on issues related to racial disparities and racial equity—community policing, education, health care, immigration, and civic leadership. The communities are: Hopkinsville, KY; Jacksonville, FL; Lynchburg, VA; Montgomery County, MD; New Haven, CT; South Sacramento, CA; Stratford, CT; and Syracuse, NY. Each community had a diverse sponsoring coalition, organized large-scale and diverse dialogue, and then worked systematically to achieve some of the action and measurable change that grew out of the dialogues. Most of the communities are still working on their action steps. There were two national learning exchanges convened by Everyday Democracy, where diverse teams from the sponsoring coalitions came together for cross-site learning. There was also an evaluator who coached the communities on evaluation and who wrote a cross-site evaluation at the end of the grant-funded portion of the project."

Harris Sokoloff (Harriss@gse.upenn.edu), faculty director of the Penn Project for Civic Engagement and author of this report, describes the "Tight Times, Tough Choices, Citizen Priorities" forums: "The four forums were each designed to be work sessions where Philadelphians met in small groups to work through some of the actual budget choices facing the city. Participants identified priorities and the trade-offs they were and were not willing to make to reach those priorities. Mayor Nutter and city officials used input from the forums in developing the City's proposed budget for 2010."

Choosing the Right Type of Engagement

Each form of public engagement gives public leaders something they need:

- **To Inform:** When public officials engage the public to inform them, officials are able to frame the issue in a particular way and disclose carefully chosen information.

- **To Acquire Feedback:** When public officials engage the public in order to hear from them, officials get individual input from a range of people on a "hot" issue that will impact many parties.

- **To Build Common Ground:** When public officials engage the public to learn from and with them, they find out how the public understands and balances the tensions and trade-offs in an issue. With this information, the officials can then better determine how to move forward on the issue and what language to use to garner more public support for it. In this process, officials also help participants learn about the issue-area and about one-another's differing perspectives and concerns.

Thus, each form of public engagement has its uses and limitations. From the interviews, surveys, and first-hand accounts of the public engagement sessions collected for this study, we have found that the third form of engagement, deliberative engagement, is the best way to build public support across differences and generate public will to support public policy.

It is important that public leaders are clear on what you will do with the work of the public and how you will use their input. Betsy McBride, Executive Director of the Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement, advises: "Do no harm. Don't mislead citizens about their prospective influence." And according to IAP2's Core Values for the Practice of Public Participation, "Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision."

Core Values for IAP2 for the Practice of Public Participation.
http://www.iap2.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=4

Build Common Ground

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT GOAL

Inform

Acquire Feedback

PART III. *Promising Practices when Conducting Public Engagement*

Deliberative engagement tends to be the best way to collaboratively work with the public to make decisions. It can also be the most complex way to connect with the public. The promising practices outlined below are designed to help you think through public engagement and provide you with the resources needed for successful deliberative engagement with your constituents.

Common Knowledge and Framing

As you think about how to create deliberative engagement opportunities to build common ground among your constituents, consider these factors:

Ensure that participants have some information in common

It is impossible for all the participants in the forum to have the same knowledge or information about the issue, but it is important to make sure they share some basic facts. This can be accomplished by preparing background materials or issue frameworks that provide participants with the basics of the issue on which the forum will focus.

For example, during the AmericaSpeaks national conversation Our Budget, Our Economy in June 2010, every participant received background information about the national budget and the budget deficit. During the forum, some of that information was summarized for those who didn't have time to read it in advance.

For an issue as sensitive as the budget deficit, the basic background information had to be vetted by a nonpartisan panel of experts. That won't always be necessary. Still, it is always a good idea to have background information developed by a group that is recognized as an honest broker, or neutral party, on the issue.

Frame the issue or topic to support deliberation

Gandhi said that "problems are pregnant with solutions" but not all ways of framing an issue will foster the development of a wealth of solutions. Indeed, public deliberation requires framing the issue more broadly than "Should we do X?" Framing the issue that way often polarizes people into yes or no camps. To reduce the possibility of such polarization, frame the issue to highlight three or four ways to understand it. This opens more avenues for resolution and joint public support.

Creating a framework that presents an issue from different perspectives can help participants think about the issue from other angles, encouraging creative and innovative deliberation. Additionally, a well-framed issue will make explicit the challenges facing the public and public leaders and can increase receptivity to government-proposed solutions.

DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT MODELS

Several major models of deliberative public engagement have grown up over the past 20 years, each backed by an organization. Models developed by these organizations may be helpful:

- AmericaSpeaks (http://americaspeaks.org/about/) uses face-to-face deliberation and electronic polling technologies to give citizens an authentic voice in public sector decision making and to encourage public officials to seek public input.

- National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) (http://nifi.org/index.aspx) is a network of civic, educational and other organizations, as well as individuals, whose common interest is to create settings for public deliberation on major issues that Americans face nationally and locally, typically using materials produced by the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, OH, among other sources.

- Everyday Democracy (http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/index.aspx), formerly called the Study Circles Resources Center, has developed a model and provides resources to help communities bring their members together to think, talk and work together to solve problems and create change.

- Public Agenda (http://www.publicagenda.org/) works to engage journalists, policymakers and the public in policy-related deliberations. It brings together multiple perspectives to build greater understanding of opinions about important domestic issues.

To learn more about how these models promote deliberative engagement, see Appendix B and C.

A well-framed issue will, typically, have the following characteristics:

- **Clarify multiple sources of a problem.** It's not necessary to engage the public around simple issues that have a single and clear technical solution. Rather, public engagement is most productive for those issues or problems that are more complex, for which there is no single technical fix, and which arise from the interplay of multiple factors. Such problems should be framed in ways that reveal their complexity and that clarify where the problem comes from and why.

- **Make sense to people with different perspectives.** Citizen participants are likely to see the issue differently based in part on how the issue affects them in their professional and personal lives, as well as on their values, goals, culture, and personalities. A well framed issue makes sense to people with different perspectives, allowing them to "see themselves" in the issue at different places.

- **Be careful of framing the issue in a biased manner.** Avoid trying to convince the community to see the issue the way you do. Rather, frame it so they know you understand their perspectives.

- **Allow for multiple approaches to solutions.** The diversity among the ways citizens see the issue will result in a diversity of approaches to addressing and solving the issue. Make sure the framework allows for the recognition of all approaches to address the issue. Be open – truly – to the solutions or approaches they offer. One of the strengths of deliberative public engagement is that it allows citizens to develop solutions or criteria of solutions they will support.

"Issues can be galvanizing without being polarizing if people are engaged in an appropriate and productive way." —Ventura, CA, Civic Engagement Manager

Keidan and Amsler, 2010, p. 31

The framing process typically starts with identifying concerns, underlying values and potential actions. That identification process should be as inclusive of different stakeholders and perspectives as possible, always making sure that the full range of stakeholder concerns, values and actions are included in the work. The next phase of the process is typically to consolidate the resulting ideas into three or four main perspectives on the issue, each having appeal to a different stakeholder perspective. Three or four perspectives is the optimal number because having only two perspectives will lead to polarization, while having more than four will generate confusion.

The National Issues Forum has several guides on issue framing that can be adapted for different uses. The guides can be accessed at www.nifi.org.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FRAMING:

Betsy McBride of Norfolk, VA, attributed a portion of her success with the project "Public Voices on Redevelopment" to how the issue was framed: "Issues of property rights and redevelopment were looming, and there was little sensible community discussion. We worked with 100 citizens to frame the issue, which turned out to be about neither property rights nor redevelopment; it was about how the community should be involved in developing a vision for the future—whose vision . . . changed the way planning is done for a key redevelopment area in Virginia Beach."

TYPICAL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TOPICS:

We asked survey participants to report on the issues that were the focus of their public engagement project. The graph below represents some of the most popular issues.

What Topics Did Your Project Explore?
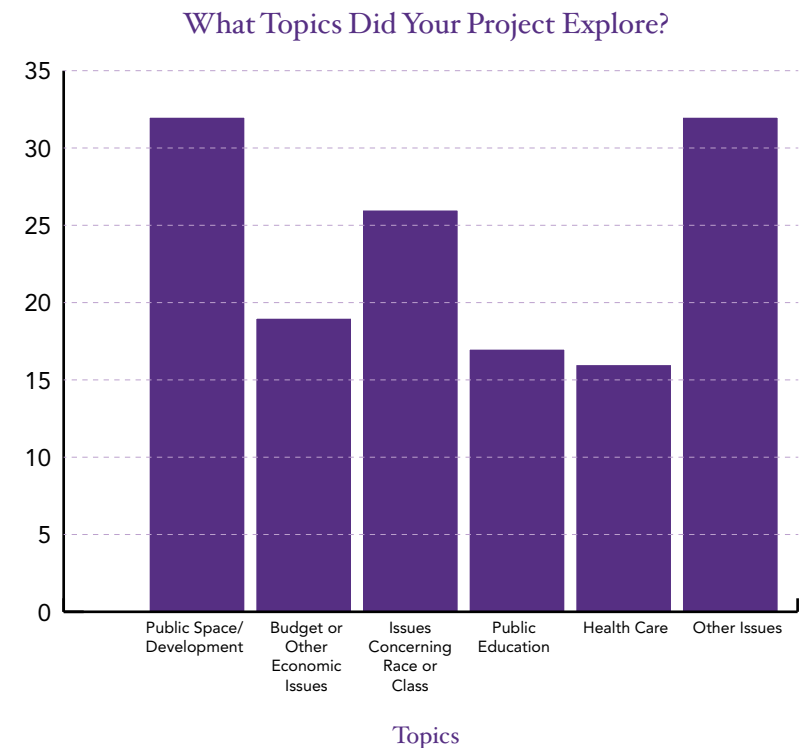
Note: Question was in "check all that apply" format. Answers labeled as "other" with 9 or fewer responses included: environment/energy, transportation, public safety, governance, neighborhood quality of life and all of the above. Includes 144 responses from 61 people.

Get the right groups involved in the process

For most issues that are ripe for public engagement, there are already organizations that view the issue as "theirs" — whether it's housing advocates or contractors for public space/development issues or doctors, hospital administrators, public health administrators, or public health advocates for health care. These organizations represent roughly two categories of people: those who can influence the outcome and those who are affected by the outcome. Identifying and working with these groups – during the issue framing process, in conducting outreach for participants, and during the deliberations themselves – can help you best apply what you learn through the process.

John Blakinger of CivilSay in Bend, OR, explains the need to solicit support from key organizations so that goals can be realized:

"If the goal is to take action, recognize the interests organizations have in the outcome and address those interests. Gain support from the organizations that have the most power to advance or subvert the actions."

As Mary Gelinas, a consultant in Trinidad, California, points out, "It is the age-old lesson: if people who understand the process are included and understand their role, they are more likely to support what comes out of it—in addition to being better able to participate in ensuing processes."

Staffing Deliberative Engagement

In order to ensure that your deliberate input session goes as planned, you should consider the following key roles in administering the event.

Moderator

A successful engagement session ultimately rests on the skill of the moderator (also referred to as the facilitator) and can be particularly important during break-out sessions. The role of the moderator is to manage the collaborative process, including keeping the discussion moving, making sure participants adhere to the ground rules, and helping participants consider key factors and take unpopular perspectives seriously. If you have more than 15-20 people you'll want to consider breaking the participants into two groups (or one moderator for every 12–15 people).

Deliberative public forums can be seen as a dance between dialogue / conversation and deliberation / decision-making. Dialogue can be understood as the sharing of information, ideas, experiences, stories and perspectives with the goal of increasing mutual understanding among participants. Deliberation occurs as participants consider and weigh options as ways of addressing the issue, keeping in mind the values discussed.

At the end of each small break-out session, moderators will help participants identify the common ground they've uncovered and then think about actions that can further that common ground, typically at least at one of three levels:

- What participants can do as individuals;
- What community organizations (for example, civic associations, churches, etc.) can do; and
- What they want public officials to do.

When deciding who should moderate the conversation, public servants must decide if they should lead the engagement or if they should hire an outside group. You should consider several factors:

How important is neutrality in deciding what to do?

- If neutrality is important, and if the public thinks the administration already has a position on the issue, then it is best to hire an outside group to run the public engagement. The outside group can lend legitimacy and neutrality to the work.

- If hiring an outside group is not an option, the agency running the engagement should try to be seen as an 'honest broker.' Cultivate a reputation for neutrality, include the full range of perspectives and constituencies in the work, and clearly represent the full range of ideas discussed in the final report.

Bringing in an outside group to help with the deliberative process doesn't mean public leaders shouldn't be present. Gary Peterson, the airport manager in Salinas, CA, who is a leader in the Community Budget Meeting Project, attributes much of the project's success to the relationship between city staff (who were conducting the meetings) and the community members.

"The design was structured so that citizens held conversations about priorities with each other, NOT with city staff. Staff was directed to listen and provide information as requested. It was absolutely not a talking head/expert process, but a citizen engagement model. . . . Maintaining your neutrality and lack of bias equals credibility in the eyes of participants. . . . Facilitators were skilled in managing large group processes and successfully managed the emotional environment so that it contributed rather than detracted from the process."

- *Transparency* can be essential to demonstrating neutrality. This includes:
  - Transparency of purpose—being explicit and open about why you are engaging the public and what you will do with what you learn;
  - Transparency of process—how the work will be done and how the results will be generated; and
  - Transparency of the work itself—posting the results of every meeting, public conversation and deliberative session on the web and in other public venues.

Do you have the internal capacity?

- One of the keys to successful public engagement is how well the engagement is planned, managed and conducted. This includes a range of factors, including issue framing, outreach, logistics, moderating skill, and producing a high quality report.

- Public agency staff is typically stretched to complete the agency's normal work. Adding the logistics of public engagement may be more than the staff can handle without help or advanced planning.

Do you need help moderating or framing the issue?

- Moderating public engagement requires significant skill in facilitating public dialogue and deliberation. It goes beyond simply calling on people; the moderator will need to frame questions and help people probe disagreements, explore trade-offs, and find common ground.

- Everyday Democracy published "A Guide for Training Public Dialogue Facilitators" in 2008 that may prove a helpful resource.

Recorders

The role of the moderator is to keep the discussion moving, make sure participants adhere to the ground rules, and see that they consider key factors and take unpopular perspectives seriously, even when working in small groups. The recorder, on the other hand, keeps a public record of the deliberation. While the goal is not to capture every word spoken, recorders should capture the main ideas as well as the connections and the tensions among them.

Some moderators like to fulfill both roles—moderator and recorder—while others like to share the recording with a partner. While this is partly a matter of individual style and ability, our experience is that dividing the role between two people, particularly for controversial issues, is good practice.

The recorder's notes create the basic public record of the small group work and of the forum. Not only can participants refer to those notes during the deliberation, but those notes can and should be posted after the meeting as a public record of what occurred.

It is important that moderators record notes so that they are viewable by the group during the discussion, such as on flip chart paper or white board, and can be used as a facilitation tool for guiding the discussion or enhancing public understanding. Using notes to facilitate the meeting has several purposes:

1. It can help participants remember where they are in the dialogue and deliberation.

2. The moderator, as well as participants, can refer back to the notes to remember what's been said.

3. If there is a plenary session at the end of the forum, the notes from each of the deliberating groups can be posted for all to see, and used as a way of understanding the work of other groups.

4. At the end of the forum, those notes can be posted publicly—on websites, in libraries, in the town hall, etc. Posting publicly is particularly important if you are trying to build public confidence and will. Having a public record of each session makes it possible for the public to trace the work of the forums. You can also use it to show how you incorporated the work of the public into the final policy decision.

Ground Rules

Some public leaders think it can be risky to bring different constituencies and interest groups together to deliberate on a public issue. They worry that the deliberation will turn into a shouting match and that the civil discourse will turn uncivil. This need not be the case. Indeed, having clear ground rules to which all agree can provide needed structure that inhibits uncivil behavior (shouting out, grandstanding, aria singing, etc.) Ground rules for the deliberation can help participants respect each other's ideas even when they don't agree. Though many of these ground rules seem like common sense, we all know that, in practice, they are not so commonly applied! Basic principles such as those below can make dialogue and deliberation more productive, gratifying and enjoyable.

Ground rules should be reviewed in the opening session, just after the task for the evening is discussed and before break-out sessions begin. It's often helpful to have the ground rules on the last slide of a power point or printed on the agenda so that they can remain visible throughout the deliberative engagement session. For more information about ground rules, refer to Appendix E.

Ground rules may include:

- No derogatory comments, shouting or disrespectful language to preserve civility;

- No interruptions—allow participants to complete their thoughts;

- An agreed upon time limit to comments, so no one monopolizes the conversation;

- Minimize side conversations – speakers should be given our full attention so we can all listen carefully to what their concerns are and try to understand their perspective;
- Come with an open mind, ready to hear other points of view and discuss them;
- Come prepared to discuss solutions and options not just problems;
- Try to talk through disagreements.

For more information on ground rules, see Appendix E.

EXAMPLES OF GROUND RULES

From The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guides, published by the Study Circles Resource Center, Pomfret, CT :

- Listen carefully to others. Try to fully understand what they are saying and respond to that, particularly when their ideas differ from you own. Try to avoid building your own arguments in your head while others are talking.
- Think together about what you want to get out of your conversations.
- Be open to changing your mind. This will help you really listen to others' views.
- When disagreement occurs, keep talking. Explore the disagreement. Search for the common concerns beneath the surface. Above all, be civil.
- Value one another's experiences, and think about how they have contributed to your thinking.
- Help to develop one another's ideas. Listen carefully and ask clarifying questions.
- Don't waste time arguing about points of fact. For the time being, you may need to agree to disagree and then move on. You might want to check out the facts before your next conversation.
- Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the conversation.

From the National Issues Forum Institute:

- Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- No one or two individuals dominate.
- The discussion will focus on the choices.
- All the major choices or positions on the issue are considered.
- An atmosphere for discussion and analysis of alternatives is maintained.
- We listen to each other.

PART IV. *Preparing for a Public Forum*

Logistics

Keep session meetings accessible. Holding public forums in places that are accessible to everyone interested is a sign that you are serious about engaging the public in all its diversity—a similar concept to accessibility for people with handicapping conditions. Criteria for accessibility include:

- **Centrality.** Hold forums in easily assessable places—locations that are on public transportation routes, are close to free or very inexpensive parking (people shouldn't have to pay to participate), and are in safe neighborhoods.
- **Neutrality.** A neutral site is one that is not seen as aligned with one interest group or another or with one political leader rather than another. It should be a place where people feel comfortable. People in each community know which places are neutral in this sense.

> While walking out of a forum one evening, someone came up to us and asked what was going on. We described the forum, and the neighbor replied: "That's an issue people in this community really care about." When we remarked that we were puzzled about the low turnout, the neighbor said, "Well, no wonder, nobody around here goes to that church!"

- **Timing.** Not everyone can participate in forums held on weekday evenings. Parents with children and people working night shifts or second jobs are among those who find weekday evenings difficult. Find out when the best times would be for a particular community, or hold more than one session, with one on a weekend morning or afternoon. It is also important to avoid scheduling at the same time as community events such as bible clubs, sporting matches, etc. For example, the Penn Project for Civic Engagement learned that although Sunday afternoons are typically good times for a forum, you want to avoid the Sundays when some of the large churches hold baptisms. Those can be all-day affairs, and you'll miss that part of the community.

> "The setting can be really important. We try to meet people where they are, use different venues in the affected neighborhood(s), and choose places that are neutral or in someone's home." —*Palo Alto, CA, City Manager*
>
> *Keidan and Amsler, p. 29*

- **Room layout.** Holding deliberative public engagement meetings or forums requires spaces that allow you to start and end in a plenary session, and break into small group work. Auditoriums with fixed seating can work for the plenary sessions, but not for small groups. Make sure to move from a room with fixed seating to rooms with flexible seating for breakout sessions. School cafeterias, library reading rooms, community centers, and church or synagogue meeting rooms can all work. Of course, the amount and configuration of space you need depends on the number of people you expect.

  Make sure that each small group has a place to post the recorder's work. Smooth walls and windows are ideal. But it's okay to be creative: some people have used moveable partitions, posts, folding tables resting on end or side, and more.

- **Supplies, materials and AV for plenary sessions.** If the plenary sessions are in a large space, a sound system can ensure that everyone hears the opening remarks, presentation of background information, ground rules, etc. If you have a presentation, you may want to use PowerPoint or a similar tool like prezi.com to highlight salient points, data, etc. If you do, the last slides could include the ground rules and a succinct description of the work to be accomplished during the session. When closing with a plenary session, a flip chart stand and notes recorded during the break out groups will help the moderator summarize main ideas, next steps, or contact information.

- **Supplies, materials and AV for small group work.** Participants might need pens and paper to jot down their ideas in preparation for or during the deliberation. We recommend having a flip chart and flip chart stand for each working group for the use of moderators or recorders. The large post-it-style easel pads are easiest, but regular flip chart paper and tape (blue painter's tape is kindest to walls) work just fine. Recorders will want to use broad-tipped markers. Dark colors (black, brown, dark blue, dark green) are easiest to see from a distance, while bright colors (red, orange, light blue) are fine for underlining or otherwise emphasizing a point. We recommend using flip chart stands rather than easels. Flip chart stands are sturdier and easier to write on than tripod easels. Moderators and recorders might also want to use the flip chart paper to post ground rules or follow the flow of the small group work.

- **Food or refreshments.** Deliberative forums typically last two and a half to three hours, including registration. It's a good idea to provide some sort of refreshments for participants as it respects their time and adds a social dimension. Depending on time of day and budget, a variety of options may be appropriate including light snacks and drinks, a light lunch, dinner or continental breakfast.
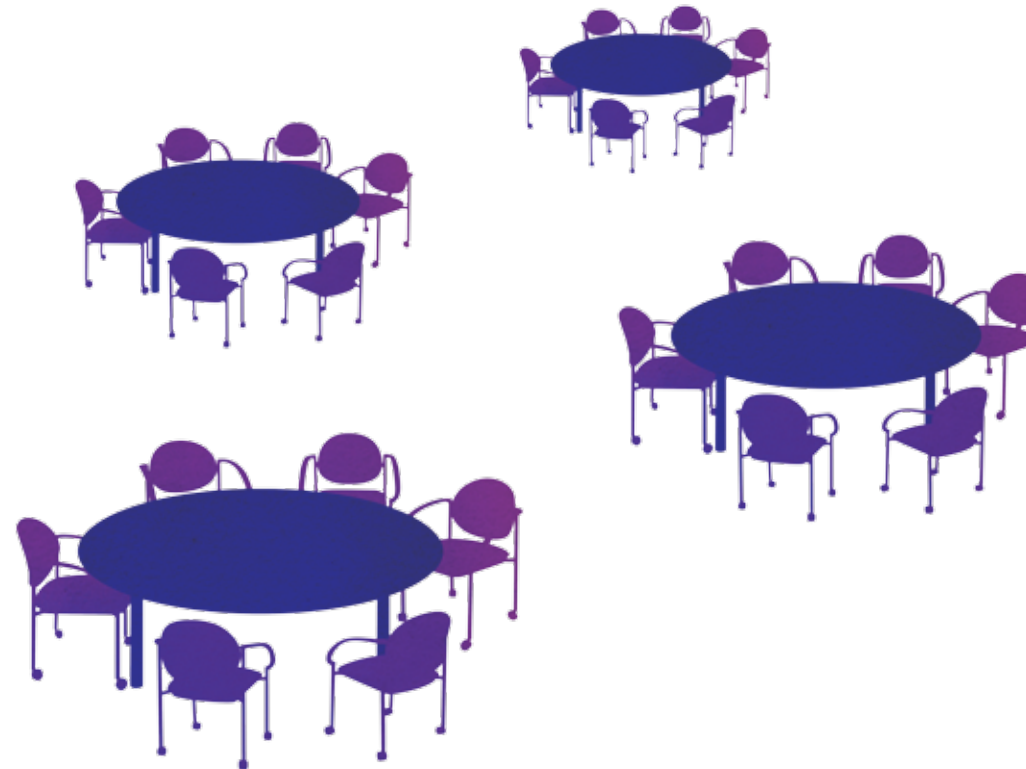
Recruiting Participants

One of the biggest challenges in public engagement is getting the public to participate. You need a clear recruiting strategy that will likely include stakeholder mapping, identifying possible participants' interests, developing partnerships with community organizations, using social networking, and working closely with the media.

Stakeholder mapping is the process of identifying stakeholder groups and brainstorming ways to reach out to each group to tell them about the forums and why it is in their interest to participate. This is typically an iterative process, as you continually ask "Who's not on the map yet?" and add to your list and your outreach.

Diversity is important in public engagement work for several reasons:

1. The more diverse the participants, the more perspectives you are likely to bring together and the richer the deliberations are likely to be.

2. Drawing in a wide circle of participants and perspectives will lead to stronger common ground. People who had previously not spoken with each other, or who had in some ways demonized each other, will find themselves working together and building common ground.

3. Since people are more likely to support something they help develop, you will be building the foundation for greater public support the outcomes of the session.

4. You will be building legitimacy by reducing the ability of any particular group to say, "You didn't include me."

Getting a representative sample of constituents to participate is challenging, particularly when you first start public engagement. Indeed, groups that feel disenfranchised or alienated may not come because they have the impression their ideas will be ignored. Strong outreach to such communities is one key to overcoming these criticisms. Another key is being clear up front about how you will use what you learn, following through and doing what you said you would, and then reminding people that you did so. Slowly but surely, you'll gain more participants from those communities.

Outreach

Stakeholder mapping is typically part of a larger process of developing outreach strategies. The goal is to brainstorm the best strategies to reach out to each group to inform them of the opportunity to meaningfully engage the issue. You'll want to have two or three strategies to reach out to each group. Think about e-mail, phone calls, social media, announcements from the pulpit, op-eds in newspapers, public service announcements on radio and TV (including, of course, public access stations) and perhaps even advertising in local media.

Use your public relations and media relations staff in these efforts. Make sure they tell people not only about the issue and the format, but also what officials will do with what they learn.

Another aspect to consider is to recruit a diverse group of individuals (in terms of socioeconomic background, race, religion and age) to help coordinate the event. Doing so will not only help bring in new ideas and perspectives on how to best organize the event, but it can help attract a greater diversity of participants by encouraging each coordinator to invite their friends and neighbors.

Outreach to or creating partnerships with different community groups—civic associations, advocacy groups, community development councils, etc.—can also help pull people into public engagement.

Social media is a rapidly growing avenue for outreach. While Facebook and Twitter are the most common, there are many other social media tools governments can utilize. After identifying the appropriate social media tool, there is then the added challenge of using that tool well, evaluating its effectiveness, and improving your use of that tool on a continuous basis. Because social media is deserving of a more in-depth understanding, we will not cover it in any more detail here but instead refer you to another Promising Practices report titled, "Making the Most of Social Media" (2009) and the update to that report "The Rise of Social Government." Both reports can be found on our publications page and www.fels.upenn.edu/Consulting-Publications.

SUCCESSFUL RECRUITING RESOURCES

In our survey results, we found the following methods to be successful in recruiting target populations for public engagement projects. Which are most effective options depends on the particular community involved and the resources available for outreach.

- invitations
- social media (Facebook, Twitter)
- newspapers
- television
- personal phone calls
- person-by-person contact
- door-to-door interviews
- open houses

- website advertisements
- advertisements in public spaces: schools, libraries, events
- e-mail listservs
- direct mail
- local publications or bulletins
- fliers or handouts
- word of mouth

Registration and Name Tags

Registration at the event, even if you ask people to pre-register, is important for several reasons. It helps you develop your outreach list, giving you names and a way to contact those who participate. Having information on numbers and breakdown of participants can help when you report back to the public. On-site, registration is the time when people get and fill in their name tags so that they can refer to each other by name during the deliberations, which can be crucial for deliberative dialogue. On-site registration is also a way to distribute people in groups, if you haven't done that yet.

Break Out Sessions

The larger the group, the more difficult it is for each person to participate actively in the dialogue and deliberation; in groups larger than 15-20, it becomes impossible. If fewer people participate (six-eight people), it will be more likely that a few ideas will dominate the deliberation and a narrower range of perspectives and knowledge will be shared. Skillful moderators and a well-structured issue framework can ensure that a broad range of perspectives is available. Still, smaller and more diverse groups can lead to a richer deliberation.

At a minimum, you'll want to take care that each small group includes people with different perspectives. There are several ways to build diversity into the small groups:

- If you ask people to register for the event in advance, you can ask them about key demographic factors (for example, gender, ethnicity, age, political perspective, etc.). You can then create the groups ahead of time to increase the likelihood that groups will be diverse.

- If you can't gather demographic data before the forum, you can randomly assign participants to small groups when they sign in. Since friends tend to have similar perspectives, you'll likely want to separate people who come together. This can help reduce the likelihood that all in a group will think alike. But it will not diversify the small groups in a reliable way. This will put more pressure on the framework and the moderator to draw out different perspectives.

Cost and a Sample Budget

Public engagement initiatives are not inexpensive, but they bring important short-term and long-term returns that can strengthen public leadership and improve community life. Below are things to include in your budget for a public engagement initiative.

THINGS TO INCLUDE IN THE BUDGET:

Please note that this list is representative only. You may not need each item listed, or you may find that you need others.

OPERATIONAL:

Venues—space rental, chair rental, etc.

Audiovisual—sound system, screen, LCD projector, etc.

Food—from light refreshments to a light meal

Supplies—paper, pens, flip chart paper, markers, flip chart stands, photocopying, printing, etc.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES:

Outreach/Recruiting and PR

Framing the project

Developing the process

Moderators

Report writing

Below are some sample costs from different public engagement projects:

- Three zoning forums, for 50–150 people each, and requiring 8–12 moderators per forum might cost between $50,000 and $75,000, including site rental and light meals.

- Four budget forums for 350–450 people each, and requiring 12–16 moderators per forum might cost between $75,000 and $100,000, including site rental and light meals.

- Problem identification and solution forums, for 25–50 people each, and requiring 2–3 moderators per forum might cost between $2,500 and $3,000 per forum.

Our survey results showed that project funding came from an array of sources: local, state, and federal government grants and contracts, nonprofit organizations and foundations, individual contributions, city or state budgets, and volunteers. The following graph shows the distribution of public engagement project budgets reported in our survey:

What was your project's budget?

- **3.7%** $500,000-$999,999
- **11.1%** $1,000,000+
- **29.6%** $0-$4,999
- **18.5%** $100,000-$499,999
- **18.5%** $50,000-$99,999
- **13.0%** $10,000-$49,999
- **5.6%** $5,000-$9,999
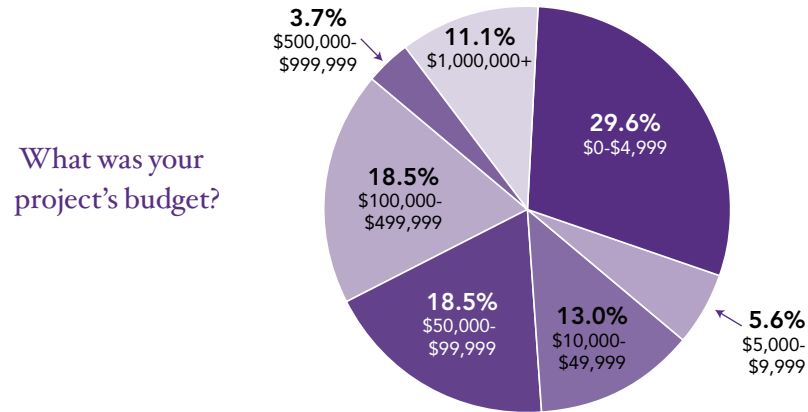
Note: The range in project budgets generally correspond to the type of public engagement project. Visioning projects usually span 5+ years and typically cost millions of dollars. Study circles, public forums, or community dialogues are usually much less costly.

After Engagement

Reporting results in a timely manner is an important aspect of public engagement. It is a way of acknowledging and respecting the time and energy participants gave to you and the work.

Results can be reported several times. First, summaries of all the small group and plenary discussions should be made available to the public as soon as possible after each forum. Posting on the internet—on your website, the websites of partner institutions and, if possible, on a media website—honors the participants' work immediately and makes the process more transparent. If a significant portion of your public doesn't have easy access to the internet, you'll want to make hard copies available at central locations such as libraries, community centers, popular public gathering spots, etc. Second, publish a final report so people can see how their input was addressed. Finally, when policies or actions surrounding the issue are announced, you should mention the public engagement activities and the role they played in decision making.

By posting session notes, publicizing reports, keeping the public updated on progress and honoring their participation, you will prove the transparency of the process and product and build trust between the public and government.
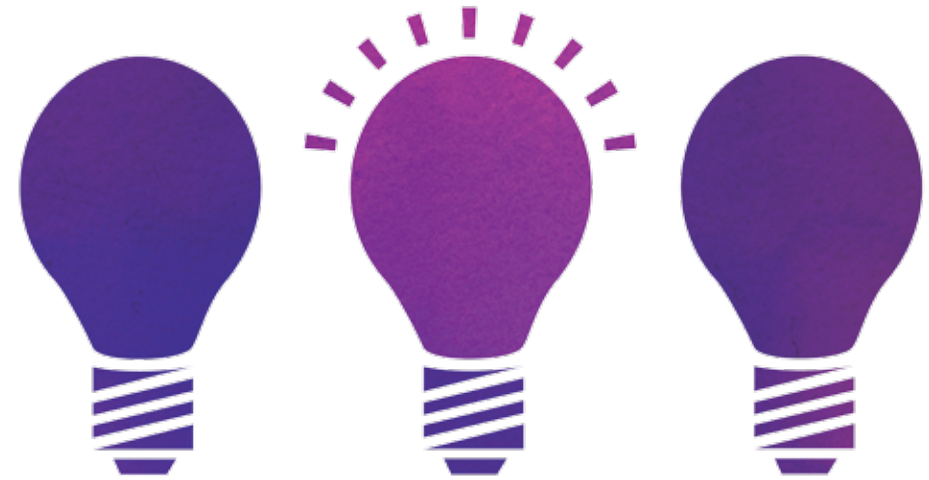
The following distills the findings discussed throughout the report to provide a succinct, clear list on the best practices to carry out a successful public engagement session.

1. **Make it meaningful.** Know beforehand what the output will be (e.g., values-based principles, public priorities, recommendations for action, etc.) and how it will be used. Define your purpose for holding an engagement meeting and chose an *engagement type* based on that purpose. Do you want to inform, collect feedback or include the public in decision making? Tell the public and make that a reason for them to come.

2. **Deliberative engagement is dynamic.** Deliberative engagement is the most complex form of interaction with the public and should be used if you want the public to *work through* the issue together with their fellow citizens and with the government. This type of engagement will allow the public to feel like they're part of the governing process, establish common ground around which decisions can be made, and develop a deep level of understanding of the trade-offs, players and values surrounding the issue.

3. **Reach out to all stakeholders**. Beyond the general public, this may include interest groups like faith groups, community organizations, local nonprofits, etc.

4. **Recruit diverse participants.** Recruit individuals and groups with a diverse range of backgrounds, interests, and economic levels to participate in the forum.

5. **Pick the right spaces.** Use a place where the community feels comfortable and is easily accessible.

6. **Pick the right times.** Hold forums at a variety of times to increase chances for public participation. For example, don't have all meetings in the evenings, but have one on a weekend and one in the morning so people on other schedules can participate.

7. **Establish ground rules.** Keep the conversation civil by informing people up-front about behavior expectations.

8. **Establish common knowledge.** Before the meeting begins, participants should enter the engagement session sharing a base level of background information. Take a short amount of time at the beginning of the meeting to review the "facts" surrounding the issue.

9. **Diversify break-out groups.** If using small groups, assign participants to each small group to ensure a diverse set of opinions are represented.

10. **Be neutral and multifaceted when framing the issue.** Create a respectful environment where less popular perspectives can be heard. Be sure to avoid pushing your perspective or the one held by your agency on participants.

11. **Employ skilled moderators.** The moderator has a big job. They manage the process, maintain order, uphold the ground rules, guide the conversation so that people find common ground, keep people focused on the issue framework, and help identify future actions participants will support. Remember, it is important to have moderators guiding every discussion, so have at least one moderator per break-out group (up to 15 people).

12. **Establish accountability and follow-up.** The public needs to know ahead of time the goal of the engagement session, which public employee will follow up with them, and how information collected will be used. Leaders of the engagement session should produce follow-up reports in a timely manner and distribute them to the public.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, what difference can public engagement make for the public administrator?

Public engagement is not a substitute for the exercise of strong leadership by individuals within government. Those people are elected or hired precisely for their vision, expertise and skills. At the same time, there are tough decisions to be made, and leaders have a clear responsibility to stimulate productive dialogue about the issue and to identify the public's opinion.

Properly constructed and run, public engagement forums and workshops can build common ground within the public and give leaders a rich and nuanced sense of what the public wants and what they will and will not support. Such forums can uncover the motivating values that the public shares and that can provide a direction for developing public policy and practice. This process is also integral to generating and maintaining the public will needed to carry out initiatives over the long term. After all is said and done, the maxim is true: people are most likely to support something they have helped develop.

Equally important, leaders who listen closely to what is said during forums can better understand how to communicate with the public effectively. This language can be a powerful tool for leaders to use as they craft their messages to that audience.

Through our research, we've found that *deliberative engagement*, as opposed to engagement sessions designed to disseminate information or collect feedback, is the most useful strategy to bring the public into government in a meaningful way. The lessons we've learned and shared here as a result of surveying and speaking with experts from across the country have provided a solid foundation for planning a productive engagement session. These *lessons learned* can be adapted to fit the unique needs and character of the governments planning engagement sessions and the constituents they are trying to reach.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: *Methodology*

To compile the most recent and relevant case-studies to supplement this report's "Lessons Learned," Fels conducted a survey of individuals, organizations, communities, cities, and local governments to get input on their successes, challenges, and lessons learned in their experiences with public engagement. We reached these audiences through the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), which generously offered to disseminate our survey to their network.

The survey consisted of 26 questions, including short answer, long answer, check-one, and check-all-that-apply in a SurveyMonkey template. The survey focused on questions asking participants to reflect on their most successful and least successful public engagement projects, including consideration of the following factors: topics/issues the project explored, type of project, why it was successful or challenging, target audience and recruiting methods, timing, funding and location, relationships with formal government structures or organizations for collaboration, and overall lessons learned. The survey also gathered information about helpful instructional or guiding resources that participants use when planning or implementing public engagement projects.

NCDD disseminated the survey via e-mail link to the NCDD listserv of members on July 22, 2010; the survey closed on July 30, 2010. The survey yielded 114 responses. An average of 55 participants completed every question. The survey participants included managers, directors, CEOs, government officials, professors, founders of nonprofit organizations, board members, and consultants. They represented organizations involved in dispute resolution, public dialogue, community development, higher education, and more. Participants represented 26 U.S. states, Washington D.C., and seven countries. California and Texas represented the most respondents with 18 and 10, respectively. Respondents represented projects conducted in the following countries: USA, Australia, Canada, China, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the UK.

To supplement the survey, nine in depth interviews were conducted over the phone. Excerpts from their responses were highlighted throughout the report.

Appendix B: *Debate, Discussion, and Deliberation*

Deliberation is a particular kind of talk. People deliberate when they realize that they are responsible for making decisions and choices—or giving guidance to others who will make those decisions—that will affect others and will have costs and consequences along with benefits. Deliberation is hard work; it means looking at the pros and cons of each approach or perspective. And that means making a real effort to find out how other people see the issue and, more importantly, why they see it the way they do. When you deliberate, you must listen to the people you don't agree with as carefully as you listen to the people you do agree with.

There are, of course, other ways to talk. You can discuss issues and problems—sharing opinions, personal experiences, and favorite solutions—and that's a fine and often satisfying thing to do. Or you can debate an issue—presenting evidence that supports your own view, countering and undercutting the arguments that others present for their views, persuading, and trying to win by presenting the best and most eloquent argument.

But with deliberation, talk goes beyond just discussion or debate—the goal is to try to understand the problem together and find solutions that will be best for everyone. Deliberation happens when a group of people work on a problem as if solving it is up to them and no one else. Deliberation is necessary when real-world decisions are the outcomes of conversation; when participants will need to live with the consequences of the choices they make.

Debate

- Winners and losers
- Search for glaring differences
- Search for weaknesses in others' positions
- Counter another's position at the expense of the relationship
- Invest wholeheartedly in your beliefs
- Listen to find flaws and counterarguments
- Is oppositional and seeks to prove the other wrong
- The goal is winning
- Defends assumptions as truth

Most useful when: A position or course of action is being advocated and winning is the goal.

Discussion

- Back and forth exchange of information, stories, experiences, viewpoints, etc.
- May focus on a topic, theme, idea, problems, issues, etc.; may be broad or focused
- A generic term meaning talking together
- Focuses on the experience of talking without any particular goal or desired outcomes
- May be between two people or among many
- May mean many kinds of talking together (such as a deliberative discussion, informative discussion, debate, dialogue, etc.)
- Usually implies participants are not adversarial or competing as in debate

Most useful when: People want to talk together about something without desiring any particular outcome from the conversation.

Deliberation

- Goal is shared understanding of the issue/problem toward making a decision
- Examining costs and consequences of even most favored approaches
- Assumes that many people have pieces of an answer and a workable solution
- Listening to understand and find meaning
- Presents assumptions for re-evaluation
- Opens possibilities for new solutions
- Leads to mutual understanding of differences and ways to act even with those differences
- People explore what's important to them and others by asking questions

Most useful when: A decision or criteria for a decision, about the best way(s) to approach an issue or problem is needed.

Appendix C: *Compromise, Consensus, and Common Ground*

Compromise, consensus and common ground each have a role to play in our decision-making activities. Compromise is most often associated with adversarial bargaining with a predetermined outcome (e.g., contact negotiations), while consensus is more frequently seen in ongoing working groups or teams where a decision with unanimous or near-unanimous agreement is important (for example, the League of Women Voters practices consensual decision-making). Common ground, or common ground for action, however, is an essential foundation for public action, which is action that unites people with diverse positions into a common direction, even if they don't agree on specifics.

The strength of compromise lies in its ability to create agreements between polarized parties, particularly when an agreement must be constructed quickly and when people can be held to that agreement by legal means. Consensus, on the other hand, is most powerful with people who have a history of working together, or who belong to an organization like the League of Women Voters. Consensus works best if there is time for people to work out differences of opinion and to convince one another that one position or action is correct.

Common ground (or common ground for action), however, draws its strength from the relationships among diverse people or groups—relationships that emerge as we work through differences and come to understand one another, and one another's values. We seek common ground for action when we work through how to act together to address a shared problem involving fundamental values—for example, when we must decide how to improve education or make our communities more livable.

Compromise

- Goal is mutual concessions
- Both sides agree they got the best deal they could
- Start and end with what's best for me (or mine)… based on self-interest
- Leads to individual, self-interested action
- Leads to hardening of positions and continued opposition
- Is constructed—create agreements by mutual concessions
- *Success is when each person is satisfied with costs and benefits*

Consensus

- Goal is mutual agreement
- Agree on actions even if not on values (on what to do, not on what's important)
- End with solidarity or conformity
- Leads to unified/single homogeneous action
- Leads to group think, which can discourage dissent
- Is artificial—create solidarity in whatever way possible
- *Success is when there is general agreement on what to do*

Common Ground for Action

- Goal is mutual understanding
- Agree on underlying values (or overlapping interests) even if we disagree on which actions get us there
- End with stronger connections/ community
- May lead to public action
- Leads to mutual understanding of differences and how we can act even with those differences
- Is organic—mutual understanding is uncovered or emerges as people explore what's important to them
- *Success is when there is mutual understanding that creates possibilities for complementary action*

Appendix D: *Structure of a Forum*

1. *Welcome & Ground Rules*
• Let participants know who is sponsoring a forum.

• Make it clear that the discussion will not be a debate.

• Introduce the issue—what we will be focusing on at this forum— and review the issue framework that will form the basis for the small group work.

• Charge the participants to do choice work, that is, to look at the pros, cons, costs, and consequences of each of the policy choices.

• Go over the ground rules, emphasizing that no one person dominates and that the moderator stays neutral.

2. *Personal Stake*
• Ask a question to connect the issue to people's lives and concerns.

• Give participants the opportunity to talk about their personal experiences with the issue. This makes the matter human, rather than abstract.

3. *Deliberation*
• Guide discussion.

• Make sure each voice receives equal attention and time.

• Use questions to stimulate discussion and ensure all choices get a fair hearing.

• At the end of the small group work, have the group clarify points of consensus.

• Discover common ground—the values, sense of purpose or direction, etc. that the group shares.

• Understand tensions that make this issue difficult to address.

• Learn the trade-offs people are and are not willing to make.

4. *Plenary Session* *–consolidating the work from each small group into one "pubic voice"*
• Share final reflections of each group to find the common ground across all the groups.

• End by asking people what they think the next steps should be for:
  ◦ Them as individuals;
  ◦ For organized groups or institutions;
  ◦ For policy Makers.

Appendix E: *Ground Rules*

Talking about public issues can bring out strong emotions, because many of our beliefs are a large part of how we identify ourselves. It is possible to respect another's feelings without necessarily agreeing with the conclusion that the person has come to.

As a moderator, you must:
• Remain neutral.
• Keep the discussion/ deliberation moving forward.
• Keep the group on track/focused on the topic/choice at hand.

While there are no sure-fire ground rules that will insure civility in a forum, establishing ground rules and getting group support for these rules in advance will make your forum more productive, satisfying and enjoyable. The following ground rules seem to be common sense; however, in practice they are not so commonly applied!

Essential
• Talk to each other not the moderator. The moderator will guide the deliberations, yet remain impartial.

• Everyone is encouraged to participate. No one dominates.

• Everyone understands that this is not a debate. The talk is deliberative rather than argumentative.

• The deliberation focuses on the options.

• The major choices or options are considered and the trade-offs are examined.

• Listening is as important as talking.

• Everyone works toward making a decision about how he or she acts on a problem or what policy he or she thinks best for the community or country.

Variations and additions
• Listen carefully to others, especially when their ideas differ from your own.

• Be open to changing your mind; this will help you really listen to others' view.

• Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the conversation.

• When disagreement occurs, keep talking. Explore the disagreement. Search for common ground.

• Value one another's experiences.

• Ask clarifying questions. Help to develop one another's ideas.

• Don't waste time arguing about points of fact. For the time being you may need to agree to disagree and then move on.

Appendix F: *Additional Resources and Reading Recommendations*

Organizational Websites

The following websites are excellent resources for public administrators. Visit these sites for more information on planning and managing community meetings, examples of successful citizen engagement projects, and recorded educational sessions.

National Coalition for Discussion & Dialogue (NCDD)

http://www.thataway.org/

NCDD is a coalition of practitioners, organizations, researchers, public officials, activists, artists and students dedicated to solving problems through honest dialogue, quality deliberation and collaborative action.

International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)

http://www.iap2.org

IAP2 is an international association of members who seek to promote and improve the practice of public participation in relation to individuals, governments, institutions, and other entities that affect the public interest in nations throughout the world.

American Planning Association (APA)

http://www.planning.org

APA is a nonprofit education and membership organization. Members include practicing planners, planning students, elected and appointed officials, planning commissioners, and interested citizens.

The American Planning Association and its professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners, are dedicated to advancing the art, science and profession of good planning—physical, economic and social—to create communities that offer better choices for where and how people work and live.

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA)

http://icma.org

ICMA advances professional local government worldwide. Its mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and advancing professional management of local government. ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, provides member support; publications, data, and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to more than 9,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world. The management decisions made by ICMA's members affect 185 million individuals living in thousands of communities, from small villages and towns to large metropolitan areas.

Institute for Local Government (ILG)

http://www.ca-ilg.org/

ILG promotes good government at the local level for California communities with practical, impartial and easy-to-use resources.

Guide on How to Implement Citizen Engagement Processes

Creighton, James. *The Public Participation Handbook: Making Better Decisions Through Citizen Involvement*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Walsh, Mary. Building Citizen Involvement: Strategies for Local Government. International City/County Management Association. 1997.

Selected Research on Public Engagement in Local Governance:

Keidan, Greg and Amsler, Terry. "The Emerging Use of Public Deliberation by Local Governments in California: Purposes, Trends, and Examples, and their Impacts on ILG Communications with Local Officials." A report submitted by the Institute for Local Government, August 2010.

Marois, Deb., Amsler, Terry, Keidan, Greg and Speers, JoAnne. "A Local Official's Guide to Public Engagement in Budgeting." Institute for Local Government, 2010.

Pearce, W. Barnett and Pearce, Kimberly A. "Aligning the work of government to Strengthen the Work of Citizens: A Study of Public Administrators in Local and regional Government." Public-Government Area, Kettering Foundation, February 2010.