



## **Communications and Civic Engagement**

# Effective Public Engagement through Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is an essential tool for effective public engagement. This tip sheet offers advice on communication strategies before, during and after the agency's public engagement effort.

## The Public Engagement Process



## I. Before the Agency Begins a Public Engagement Effort:

### Understand the Audiences

**In order to effectively communicate about a public process or program, the starting point is to understand who the agency seeks to engage.**

- Identify key audiences and stakeholders. What are their interests? How do they connect to the project or policy?
- Identify the community values, commonly held principles or valued qualities, such as personal safety, freedom or fairness. Understanding this can help you craft your message.
- Ask stakeholders about their preferences regarding communication. What communications channels work best for them? Getting this perspective during planning both enhances understanding of these key audiences and creates a valuable communication channel for further engagement.
- Understand connections and relationships among audiences and individuals. Who are their trusted advisors? How willing are these influencers to act? Understanding these dynamics can help the agency broaden the impact of its engagement effort.

With the above information in mind, the agency can identify and prioritize communication channels that align with the needs, opportunities and resources of both the project or policy and the audiences that the agency seeks to engage.

## Consider Both the Message and the Messenger

---

**In developing a message for a policy or project, succinctly and clearly articulate the message.**

- What is at stake for the community.
- Why the audience should care. Explain how the decision could affect what different people value.
- The action the agency wants the audience to take. For example, is the goal to help inform people, help them analyze and weigh in on different solutions to a problem, or take a specific step?
- What will happen if audience members do take action. Consider the choice of messenger and how it will affect the way in which people will receive the agency's message.
- Identify and support community champions who can speak with authenticity and power to the issue or need being addressed.
- Consider developing an outreach working group to help extend the agency's ability to reach into different audiences in the community.
- Empower community members as storytellers. Personal perspective on a proposed policy or project can be compelling to broader audiences and the media. Tie the agency's communication plan to the policy or project consideration process.
- What are the policy or project decision-making milestones?
- How will the agency communicate progress towards key decision-making milestones?
- How will the agency communicate how public input influenced the final outcomes of the decision-making process? Tie the agency's communication plan to the policy or project consideration process.
- What are the policy or project decision-making milestones?
- How will the agency communicate progress towards key decision-making milestones?
- How will the agency communicate how public input influenced the final outcomes of the decision-making process?

## Create a Media Plan that Integrates Both Traditional (Print, Radio and Television) and Online Outlets

---

- Develop key story themes and messengers.
  - Find the right community partners and champions to help spread the agency's information and messages.
  - Develop a sequence of messages that tie to key milestones in the policy or project.
  - Scale the level of media activity to fit the time frames and capacities of the media outlets and contacts in the area.
- Create a list of media, reporters, key bloggers and online journalists who reach priority audiences.
  - Identify both larger and smaller community-based publications and outlets, including radio. Be sure to include the newsletters, blogs and events of key community partners.
  - Consider the different types of reporters and outlets who might cover various angles of the story (health, real estate, living, local agency beat, ethnic media, etc.).
- Create a planning calendar for the decision-making process on the policy or project.
  - Include key milestones, events, news happenings and announcements that can engage the public.

- Plug into other activities related to the policy or project topic locally, nationally and even internationally.
  - Brainstorm different ways to slice the story to ensure ongoing coverage.
  - List the different news opportunities (for example, at launch, when funding is secured, when a proposal is made, when success is achieved). Find the other relevant angles (for example, health, sustainability, education). Identify submission opportunities for opinion pieces and who are the right spokespeople and storytellers.
- Monitor the media for opportunities to respond to other related stories with information about your policy or project.

## II. During the Public Engagement Process:

### Create opportunities for Sustaining Communication

---

**Public engagement efforts are most successful when spokespeople consider context, content and commitment in relation to the audiences they seek to reach.**

- Create opportunities for engagement through channels and events both within and outside of the public agency.
- Offer multiple opportunities for the public to communicate back to the agency (surveys, online forums and meetings) to reflect that different groups will have different preferences in terms of communications channels.
- Show progress, new information or actions as proactively and quickly as possible.
- Follow up on commitments made (for example, to get answers to questions) and (when possible) immediately ask for feedback about the agency's communications and engagement efforts.
- Recognize and thank partners and collaborating stakeholders for their efforts during the engagement process.

### Expand Opportunities for Sustained Interaction with the Media to Maximize Strategic Communication and Public Engagement

---

- Train spokespeople on the needs and tendencies of media representatives.
- Develop relationships with key reporters and outlets:
  - Be respectful of deadlines.
  - Provide them with only story ideas their audiences will care about.
  - Understand which outlets do and do not have reporters who routinely cover your topic, and adjust the background material you provide accordingly.
  - Don't ask to review a quote or the story.
  - Ask for corrections only if there are grave factual errors.
  - Give them information they ask for even if it is not relevant to the policy or project.
- Pitch news stories and submit opinion pieces consistent with the agency's planning calendar. Consider an editorial board meeting with the local daily newspaper at the beginning of the effort. Another possibility is an "educational" news briefing with background information for outlets that do not have a reporter on that beat (such as ethnic media, recently downsized local papers, radio, etc.)
- Communicate progress points and/or key lessons along the way to support champions and demonstrate that the community conversation is influencing the decision-making process.
- Invite media to all community meetings and make spokespeople available for interviews.

- Be prepared to take advantage of opportunities to react to news events. Have drafts of op-eds and letters to the editor that the right community member or other stakeholder can review, sign and submit quickly.
- Share media coverage with priority audiences (for example, provide printouts at community meetings, post on the agency's website and share through other online tools).

## III. After the Public Engagement Process:

### Measure and Evaluate the Engagement

---

**At the conclusion of an engagement process, use quantitative and qualitative metrics to evaluate, adjust and improve your strategy. Lessons learned from both successful and unsuccessful strategies can help to refine the agency's understanding of the values, interests and concerns of audiences and stakeholders. This will benefit future engagement efforts.**

- Gather qualitative data through surveys, interviews, focus groups or informal channels.
- Use process measures to assess what you did including:
  - Materials distributed,
  - Outreach conducted,
  - Media engaged, and
  - Staff, friends, partners and others reached.
- Use outcome measures to assess what happened:
  - Did you achieve the goals?
  - How many new people did you reach?
  - Did you receive positive media coverage?
  - Who used the key messages?
  - Did you earn endorsements?
  - Who got involved and what did they do?
- Ask for feedback and advice from stakeholders.

#### **Additional Information**

To learn more about measuring public engagement success, visit the Institute for Local Government's public engagement resources at ([www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement](http://www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement))

### Create Opportunities for Ongoing Communication and Concentrate on Maintaining the Relationships with Stakeholders

---

**As with any relationship, maintaining communication after an engagement effort has been completed will ensure that audiences and stakeholders stay informed-making them more likely to participate in future efforts.**

- Share findings and lessons learned from debriefing and performance assessments.
- Circle back to stakeholders with information that shows how their efforts made a difference. Thank them for their involvement.
- Use existing venues (governing body meetings, public events) and resources (website, e-mail newsletters) to celebrate new approaches, new relationships or specific successful outcomes that highlight partners or collaborating stakeholders.
- Create an ongoing network for information sharing with stakeholders and community groups.
- Look for ways to support or connect with stakeholders during the periods between major engagement efforts.

The Institute thanks the Metropolitan Group for contributing to this publication. Generous financial support for this resource was provided by The James Irvine Foundation. All decisions regarding the final content of this publication were made by the Institute for Local Government.

## About the Institute for Local Government

This tip sheet is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities, the California State Association of Counties and the California Special Districts Association.

For more information and to access the Institute's resources on public engagement, visit [www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement](http://www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement).

© 2015 Institute for Local Government. All rights reserved.

# City Use of SOCIAL MEDIA: Legal & Other Considerations

By Melissa Kuehne

Nearly 75 percent of Americans now use social media. According to the Pew Research Center, as of August 2018, two-thirds (67 percent) of Americans reported that they get at least some of their news on social media including, for the first time, more than half (55 percent) of those age 50 or older. Americans are also now more likely than ever to get news from multiple social media sites, with approximately one quarter of all U.S. adults (26 percent) getting news from two or more social media sites. This is in contrast to a drop in daily newspaper circulation (down 11 percent) and viewership of cable evening news (down 12 percent), network morning news (down 10 percent) and local morning news (down 15 percent).

These statistics illustrate some of the reasons that cities statewide are increasingly experimenting with and expanding their use of social media. In addition to the pervasiveness of social media use among Americans, online platforms like social media offer cities a number of community engagement and transparency benefits.

“Our city is relatively new to social media, opening its first accounts in 2016,” says Alexa Davis, assistant to the city manager for Rolling Hills Estates. “The city is on Facebook, Instagram and NextDoor and is experimenting with livestreaming via Facebook Live to better engage with our community, be responsive to concerns and share city news and events.”

Cities are building social media into their communications plans to help disseminate information and promote city events and projects. In addition, social media can encourage engagement from community members who may not normally get involved in civic matters because of time or transportation constraints, language barriers or other obstacles. Allowing residents to provide feedback and comments beyond in-person public forums and council meetings can provide cities with a broader picture of community values and perspectives. This open dialogue and engagement gives residents more access to the city decision-making process, which typically results in greater transparency.

“Maintaining an active social media presence allows me to share information and connect with my constituents — especially the younger generations — in a meaningful way,” says San Luis Obispo Mayor Heidi Harmon. “I hope to encourage and inspire my community to get involved with the city and in the decisionmaking process.”

## Challenges Related to Social Media

Although social media offers benefits and opportunities for cities, it also has some potential challenges.

For example, cities and other entities often struggle with how to manage their social media presence. A choice must be made about whether the site management is centralized as a function of the public information officer or communications staff or is decentralized to department staff. Centralized management more easily enables consistent messaging, branding and posting but it can also be

---

Melissa Kuehne is communications and development manager for the Institute for Local Government and can be reached at [mkuehne@ca-ilg.org](mailto:mkuehne@ca-ilg.org). Corrie Manning, deputy general counsel for the League; Kara Ueda, attorney with the law firm of Best Best & Krieger LLP; and Christine Dietrick, city attorney for San Luis Obispo, also contributed to this article.

*Online platforms like social media offer cities a number of community engagement and transparency benefits.*



time consuming. Although decentralized management allows staff with subject-matter expertise to post content and may create more buy-in and ownership from staff, it likely also creates the need for more upfront training of staff and oversight by communications and/or executive staff to ensure appropriate messaging.

Another consideration is staff time. Though some platforms can assist staff by allowing posts to be scheduled ahead of time, staff time still needs to be allocated to developing new content and responding to emerging stories and issues. As with all communications in a 24-hour news cycle world, it is important to set and manage expectations about response time to comments and messages.

There may also be a concern that only people with negative comments and opinions will engage. Adopting a social media policy with clear guidelines on how the site is moderated — such as no offensive or profane language, comments must be relevant to the related post, no personal attacks, etc. — can help staff address some of these concerns.

### **Legal Considerations**

Currently not much legal precedent exists related to what cities can and cannot do on social media. However, when making decisions about how to engage on social media, cities should take a number of legal considerations into account. It is also always advisable to consult your city attorney if you have questions.

### **The Brown Act**

The Brown Act requires governing bodies of local agencies to conduct open and public meetings, subject to limited exceptions, and to post meeting agendas in advance. It also prohibits “serial meetings” — a series of communications that results in a majority of decisionmakers conferring on an issue. This prohibition applies to electronic communications such as email and therefore may extend to interactions and comments on social media channels as well. For example, if a majority of the council comments on or likes the same post, this could be considered a “serial meeting” and trigger a Brown Act violation. It is also important to note that the Brown Act becomes applicable when candidates are elected, and not just when they take office.

### **The Public Records Act**

The Public Records Act, subject to specified exemptions, requires public agencies to make documents created, used or possessed by the agency available to the public upon request. It is not currently clear which records cities are required to keep in relation to social media — whether just the posts and comments of the city itself or all comments on city posts. It is also unclear if the internet archives of the social media pages are sufficient or if cities need to download and save all records on their servers with other files.



*continued*

### Due Process

Constitutional due process principles require a decisionmaker to be fair and impartial when the decisionmaking body is sitting in what is known as a “quasi-judicial” capacity. Quasi-judicial matters include variances, use permits, annexation protests, personnel disciplinary actions and licenses. Quasi-judicial proceedings tend to involve the application of common requirements or principles to specific situations, much as a judge applies the law to a particular set of facts. If conversations about proposed city projects occur on social media sites, this may be considered a violation of the “ex parte communications” doctrine, which suggests that in quasi-judicial matters all communications to decision-makers about the merits (or demerits) of an issue should occur in the context of the noticed hearing.

### First Amendment Considerations

Another legal question arises around whether elected officials can block users and whether or not that constitutes a violation of the free speech clause of the First Amendment. A recent case, *Davison v. Loudoun County Board of Supervisors*, examines this issue. In this case, the chair of the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors blocked a constituent from her Facebook page for approximately 12 hours. The

constituent then sued, alleging this was a violation of his First Amendment and due process rights. The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia found that the operation of the Facebook page created a “public forum” and therefore by blocking the constituent on the basis of his viewpoint constituted a violation of his First Amendment rights. However, the court also noted that public officials may moderate comments on their social media pages, and that it may not always violate the First Amendment to ban or block commenters from social media platforms. While this decision has no direct impact on California cities, it offers an interesting case study of how other jurisdictions are grappling with this complex issue.

For more information on the ethics laws mentioned here, visit [www.ca-ilg.org/ethics](http://www.ca-ilg.org/ethics).

### Tips to Consider

**Include social media in the orientation for newly elected officials.** Many — if not most — cities conduct orientations for new council members covering city ordinances and state laws that council members need to understand and keep in mind. It may be helpful to include social media in this discussion to share your city’s social media policy (if one exists) or share some of the legal considerations mentioned here as they make

### More Information Online

For additional information and links to related resources, read the online version of this article at [www.westerncity.com](http://www.westerncity.com).

the transition from candidate to council member. For example, suggest that they should at least be mindful of who else is commenting — particularly other council members — when they are considering commenting on social media posts.

**Create a social media policy.** Such a policy can set parameters on the branding, messaging and content for city-administered pages and outline policies for moderating discussions — for example, provide specific guidelines on moderating comments on Facebook. In addition, policies can outline which city staff members have the ability to post and/or the approval process for posting to social media channels. The Institute for Local Government offers a number of sample social media policies for cities to reference. For more information, visit [www.ca-ilg.org/social-media-strategies](http://www.ca-ilg.org/social-media-strategies). ■

**Adopting a social media policy with clear guidelines on how the site is moderated can help staff address concerns.**





## What is Public Engagement?

There are many terms that describe the involvement of the public in civic and political life. We offer one set of terms and definitions here not because we're sure these definitions are the best or most complete – or even that most people would agree with them - but because we think it's important to draw distinctions among the various ways people can become involved. This is important because understanding these differences will help local officials “fit” the best approach (or approaches) to the issue, policy or controversy at hand. The exact terms and definitions are less important than recognizing that these distinctions exist.

&

## Why Should I do it?

Local governments throughout California are applying a variety of public engagement strategies and approaches to address issues ranging from land use and budgeting to climate change and public safety. They are discovering a number of benefits that can result from the successful engagement of their residents in local decision making.

# What is Public Engagement?



## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

This is an extremely broad term that includes the many ways that residents involve themselves in the civic and political life of their community. It encompasses volunteering as a local Little League coach, attending neighborhood or community-wide meetings, helping to build a community playground, joining a city or county clean-up effort, becoming a member of a neighborhood watch group or local commission – and much more.



## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

This is a general term we are using for a broad range of methods through which members of the public become more informed about and/or influence public decisions. Given our work to support good public involvement in California, we are especially focused on how local officials use public involvement practices to help inform residents and help guide the policy decisions and actions of local government.



## PUBLIC INFORMATION/OUTREACH

This kind of public engagement is characterized by one-way local government communication to residents to inform them about a public problem, issue or policy matter.

Examples could include: a website article describing the agency's current budget situation; a mailing to neighborhood residents about a planned housing complex; or a presentation by a health department to a community group about substandard housing or "bird" flu policies.



## PUBLIC CONSULTATION

This kind of public engagement generally includes instances where local officials ask for the individual views or recommendations of residents about public actions and decisions, and where there is generally little or no discussion to add additional knowledge and insight and promote an exchange of viewpoints.

Examples include typical public hearings and council or board comment periods, as well as resident surveys and polls. A public meeting that is mainly focused on asking for "raw" individual opinions and recommendations about budget recommendations would fit in this category.



## PUBLIC PARTICIPATION/DELIBERATION

This form of public engagement refers to those processes through which participants receive new information on the topic at hand and through discussion and deliberation jointly prioritize or agree on ideas and/or recommendations intended to inform the decisions of local officials.

Examples include community conversations that provide information on the budget and the budget process and ask participants to discuss community priorities, confront real trade-offs, and craft their collective recommendations; or the development of a representative group of residents who draw on community input and suggest elements and ideas for a general plan update.



## SUSTAINED PUBLIC PROBLEM SOLVING

This form of public engagement typically takes place through the work of place-based committees or task forces, often with multi-sector membership, that over an extended period of time address public problems through collaborative planning, implementation, monitoring and/or assessment.

# Why Engage the Public?

---



## BETTER IDENTIFICATION OF THE PUBLIC'S VALUES, IDEAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Elections help identify voter preferences and communication with individual constituents provide additional information to local officials about resident views on various topics. However gaps often remain in understanding the public's views and preferences on proposed public agency actions and decisions. This can especially be the case for residents or populations that tend to participate less frequently or when simple "pro" or "con" views don't help solve the problem at hand. Good public engagement can provide more nuanced and collective views about an issue by a broader spectrum of residents.



## MORE INFORMED RESIDENTS - ABOUT ISSUES AND ABOUT LOCAL AGENCIES

Most residents do not regularly follow local policy matters carefully. While a relatively small number do, most community members are not familiar, for instance, with the ins and outs of a local agency budget and budget process, or knowledgeable about planning for a new general plan, open space use or affordable housing. Good public engagement can present opportunities for residents to better understand an issue and its impacts and to see local agency challenges as their challenges as well.



## IMPROVED LOCAL AGENCY DECISION - MAKING AND ACTIONS, WITH BETTER IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

Members of the public have information about their community's history and needs. They also have a sense of the kind of place where they and their families want to live. They can add new voices and new ideas to enrich thinking and planning on topics that concern them. This kind of knowledge, integrated appropriately into local decision making, helps ensure that public decisions are optimal for the community and best fit current conditions and needs.



## MORE COMMUNITY BUY-IN AND SUPPORT, WITH LESS CONTENTIOUSNESS

Public engagement by residents and others can generate more support for the final decisions reached by local decision makers. Put simply, participation helps generate ownership. Involved residents who have helped to shape a proposed policy, project or program will better understand the issue itself and the reasons for the decisions that are made. Good communications about the public's involvement in a local decision can increase the support of the broader community as well.



## MORE CIVIL DISCUSSIONS AND DECISION MAKING

Earlier, informed and facilitated deliberation by residents will frequently offer a better chance for more civil and reasoned conversations and problem solving than public hearings and other less collaborative opportunities for public input.



## FASTER PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION WITH LESS NEED TO REVISIT AGAIN

Making public decisions is one thing; successfully implementing these decisions is often something else altogether. The buy-in discussed above, and the potential for broad agreement on a decision, are important contributors to faster implementation. For instance, a cross section of the community may come together to work on a vision or plan that includes a collective sense of what downtown building height limits should be. If this is adopted by the local agency and guides planning and development over time, the issue will be less likely to reoccur as an issue for the community and for local officials. In general, good public engagement reduces the need for unnecessary decision-making “do-over.”



## MORE TRUST - IN EACH OTHER AND IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Whatever their differences, people who work together on common problems usually have more appreciation of the problem and of each other. Many forms of public engagement provide opportunity to get behind peoples’ statements and understand the reasons for what they think and say. This helps enhance understanding and respect among the participants. It also inspires confidence that problems can be solved – which promotes more cooperation over time. Whether called social capital, community building, civic pride or good citizenship, such experiences help build stronger communities. Additionally, when a local agency promotes and is a part of these processes - and takes the ideas and recommendations of the public seriously - a greater trust and confidence in local government often results.



## HIGHER RATES OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Engaging the public in new ways offers additional opportunities for people to take part in the civic and political life of their community. This may include community members who have traditionally participated less than others. These are avenues for not only contributing to local decisions but for residents to gain knowledge, experience and confidence in the workings of their local government. These are future neighborhood volunteers, civic and community leaders, commissioners and elected officials. In whatever role they choose, these are individuals who will be more prepared and more qualified as informed residents, involved citizens and future leaders.

---

Generous financial support for this resource was provided by The James Irvine Foundation. All decisions regarding the final content of this publication were made by the Institute for Local Government.



## About the Institute for Local Government

This tip sheet is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities, the California State Association of Counties and the California Special Districts Association.

For more information and to access the Institute’s resources on public engagement, visit [www.ca-ilg.org/publicengagement](http://www.ca-ilg.org/publicengagement).

© 2016 Institute for Local Government. All rights reserved.