RECOMMENDATIONS
for supporting more effective and inclusive public engagement19

19 These suggestions were developed by Public Agenda based on the current research and decades of practical experience supporting sound public engagement.
Based on this research, as well as decades of experience supporting sound public engagement, Public Agenda proposes a number of recommendations for local officials and civic and community-based organizations who seek to improve the public decision-making process by including broad cross sections of the public in meaningful deliberations, as well as for foundations and other supporters interested in funding these efforts. Our point is not that every local official should be using deliberative methods all the time but that these “deeper” approaches should be seen as a “tool in the toolbox” of public problem solving. Our research demonstrates that interest in more innovative processes—compared with, say, a traditional public hearing—appears to be growing, and that this interest can be supported by the right strategies, which we outline in the following sections.

This research revealed that California’s civic leaders believe there is significant room for improvement in local government officials’ efforts to include the public in their decision making. Most civic leaders expressed a willingness to collaborate with local officials to improve public engagement processes in their communities.

Interestingly, California’s civic leaders’ and local officials’ views, attitudes and ambitions regarding public engagement are more complementary than one might expect. Both groups see major shortcomings in traditional public hearings and comment opportunities, which exclude large sectors of the public. Both groups expressed a keen interest in, and some experience with, more inclusive and deliberative forms of public engagement. About half of local officials and four in ten civic leaders reported having participated in a collaborative effort in the past twelve months that sought meaningful public input on an issue and provided a diverse group of residents with the chance to deliberate on the trade-offs of public decisions. Despite their general interest, many civic leaders and local officials also have some reservations about the benefits and costs of such a process.

Here are a number of recommendations for local officials and for civic and community-based organizations who seek to include broad cross sections of the public in meaningful deliberations, and for funders who want to support these efforts.
Network with colleagues about better ways to engage the public. Many local officials are frustrated with the public engagement status quo and interested in exploring alternative means to involve residents. It would likely be fruitful for local officials to engage and learn from each other by comparing experiences, sharing the cost of professional development and exchanging strategies and practical resources. Local officials who have seen community relations and local decision making improve as a result of more deliberative engagement processes could lead these networking efforts and help their more tentative colleagues identify opportunities to experiment with new engagement approaches in their communities.

Build ongoing and sustaining capacity through professional development and by making engagement competencies a criterion when hiring new staff. There are numerous organizations, associations and academic institutions, both California based and national, through which local officials can gain information, resources, training and other tools to support deliberative public engagement. (For instance, the League of California Cities and the California Association of Counties presently support their own Institute for Local Government, which makes public engagement and other resources available to local officials in California; and the Davenport Institute, at Pepperdine University, is an example of a prominent academic institution that offers local governments and community-based organizations public engagement support and training.) Moreover, auditing existing public engagement skills and knowledge within their departments and agencies will help local officials assess their strengths and weaknesses, which can then be augmented and addressed as new hires are made over time.

Evaluate local public engagement efforts. Ongoing capacity building is also increased by local officials’ evaluation of their own engagement experiments. Evaluations should be planned around clearly established goals and expectations. They can be used to tweak ongoing engagement processes as well as to inform future ones. Lessons learned through evaluations also constitute a valuable resource to be shared with colleagues and thus to inform public engagement efforts elsewhere.

Reach out to civic and community-based organizations to make them partners in public engagement. This survey found that most local officials are not effectively accessing the resources and networks of civic and community-based organizations, particularly those that could help them reach traditionally disenfranchised groups. Meanwhile, our companion study with civic leaders suggests that many civic and community-based organizations are seeking stronger relationships and better collaboration with their local officials. Building long-term and trusting partnerships between local government and civic organizations has the potential to improve public participation opportunities and help spread the use of more deliberative forms of engagement across communities.
Partner with local officials who are interested in finding better ways to engage the public. Many local officials are frustrated with the public engagement status quo, and they are interested in exploring alternative means to engage residents and others. Now may be the right time to engage local officials more directly in serious discussions about how to improve public participation in local government decision making, and to share stories of successes, build partnerships and establish common expectations and goals. Among the many ways that civic and community-based organizations can support better community engagement are:

- Codesigning and cohosting forums (which sometimes is appropriate and beneficial to do in partnerships with public agencies and officials)
- Recruiting and/or training facilitators and recorders
- Providing venues, volunteers, childcare, food and other ingredients for productive community conversations
- Supporting the creation of nonpartisan discussion materials and guides
- Recruiting diverse participants (certainly among the most important roles community-based organizations can play)
- Playing a role in forum evaluation and follow-up (such as supporting new public-private-civil society partnerships, helping to communicate the results of forums, etc.)

Build capacity by networking and sharing resources with other civic and community-based organizations, and through professional development and systematic evaluation of public engagement efforts. Many civic leaders, we found, feel that their organizations may lack resources and staff to implement comprehensive deliberative engagement processes. Collaborations with other organizations—to share resources and to benefit from each other’s experience and networks—are therefore important. Moreover, there are numerous organizations, associations and academic institutions, both California based and national, through which civic leaders and public officials alike can access training and tools to support deliberative public engagement. Capacity can be further increased by planning for systematic self-assessment and evaluations of engagement efforts. Using and sharing the results of evaluations can build stronger partnerships with local officials and other civic organizations and improve public engagement efforts in the future.
Beyond Business as Usual

Support local officials and civic and community-based organizations in efforts to build long-term partnerships that expand and improve opportunities for public participation. This research points to a lack of strong, ongoing relationships between local government and civic and community-based organizations. Most local officials are not effectively accessing the resources and networks of community organizations, particularly those that could help them reach traditionally disenfranchised groups. And many civic leaders, especially those serving immigrant and low-income communities, seek better relationships with their local officials but also criticize them for not providing adequate opportunities for participation. Supporting the development of long-term and trusting partnerships between civic organizations and local government has the potential to improve public participation opportunities and help spread the use of more deliberative forms of engagement across communities. Sometimes a small amount of seed money to experiment with an early partnership between a public agency and a community organization can result in a long-term relationship that nurtures community growth well beyond a specific instance of public engagement.

Sponsor trainings and technical assistance for local governments and communities to build ongoing and sustaining public engagement capacity. Rather than providing support for single engagement activities, funders could help communities develop the goals, principles and practices to guide the successful and recurring use of public engagement in appropriate instances over time. For example, they could help make available a wide range of existing public engagement–related skills, strategies and tools from which local officials and civic and community-based organizations can benefit, including: public engagement design, participant identification and recruitment, issue framing, process facilitation, communication strategies, evaluation and the preparation of background and discussion materials. Funders could also sponsor opportunities for shared strategy and skill development for the staff of local governments and community-based organizations, thus promoting relationship building and collaborative experimentation with public engagement processes.

Document and share stories of success. In pursuing any innovation, it is helpful to document and to build on initial successes through compelling stories that encourage replication, especially by those 47 percent we identified as “tentative” local officials. This includes providing opportunities for local officials to respond to these stories, ask questions and get advice from their more experienced peers on how best to replicate deliberative engagement process in their communities.

Support experiments with online engagement tools and digital technologies in order to share best practices. As we all know, the online world is constantly changing, and new platforms and strategies for engaging communities online continually emerge. But most officials still feel that these tools are hard to use effectively and that their impacts are hard to gauge. Experiments and evaluations underwritten by foundations can be one means to support, assess and share what works online.

IDEAS FOR FUNDERS:
• **Address the engagement needs of rural communities.** This survey suggests that more needs to be done so that officials in California’s rural areas can be equally informed, equipped and supported in their efforts to engage the public. Rural officials are in even greater need of capacity-building assistance than their suburban and urban counterparts. Rural communities might warrant dedicated experiments in online engagement and distance learning.

• **Support research and evaluation of public engagement methods and publicize best practices.** Funders can be particularly influential in expanding research and evaluation into various public engagement methods, especially approaches that are explicitly designed to overcome challenges common to more traditional engagement formats. To this end, it is important to encourage and support local officials in assessing their own engagement efforts, and to promote independent research that tracks ongoing public engagement trends and impacts. Some of the main questions that need to be answered are: Which issues are most and least suitable for which types of public engagement strategies? Can deliberative methods engage more citizens and address the problems of public anger and mistrust? Do these methods lead to better decisions? What types of technical assistance and capacity building have the greatest impact in helping local officials succeed in their search for more effective methods of dialogue with the public? And how can more inclusive and deliberative forms of engagement shape the political and economic life of a community in the long term?