Beyond the Tools: Four Critical Elements for Good Public Engagement

By Daniel Clarke & Steve Brigham

Back in 1998, when we inaugurated the public engagement model now known as the 21st Century Town Meeting™, we stood as one of the early innovators using interactive technologies in public meetings. We have used this model – and variations of it – ever since in a wide variety of public policy and planning settings and very frequently in urban and regional planning efforts.

***Figure 1**: Diverse group in a facilitated roundtable discussion*

During that time, we have seen numerous other interactive tools emerge that we have utilized in our engagement work, including GIS tools like INDEX and CommunityViz. Without a doubt, these tools and many others have increased the value of public engagement for everybody involved, including citizens, stakeholders, planners, and policy makers.

For citizens and stakeholders, the tools help to make planning issues more accessible, and the planning process more transparent. They support informed engagement, including important context citizens need to understand. They also provide levity and excitement to public meetings, which really helps people stay focused and engaged on important issues and tasks. With tools like these, planners and policy makers can see how citizens and stakeholders react when they are presented with real choices and real information about the impact of those choices. Yes, the tools are great, and the development of tools has come a long way in the past 10-15 years. Moreover, for regional planning with its broad geography, complex issues and long timeframe, support tools are essential.

There is a risk, however, of becoming too enamored with the tools and losing sight of how to effectively utilize them in a larger effective public engagement context. Many planners know this, but we have seen many meetings where the tools and technology dominate the meeting, and we have seen many good intentions lead to ineffective efforts in engaging the public.

In this article, we focus on four elements that are critical for good public engagement, beyond the selection and use of interactive technologies and planning tools:

- Linking to decision making
- Diverse representation
- Informed participation
- Good meeting design and facilitation

Linking to Decision Making

Core to our belief in citizen engagement is that people should have the opportunity to influence the decisions that impact their lives. The fact is too many public meetings do not have any significant influence on the end result – a policy change or new plan. Good public engagement does not waste time asking citizens and other stakeholders to provide input that has no real potential to impact decision making or outcomes

In our initial meetings with planning clients, we insist on clarity about what they want citizens to potentially influence. Many clients are accustomed to sharing information with the public about what is to be done, or what might be done. Or they look to present something that they hope the public will accept or endorse without much back and

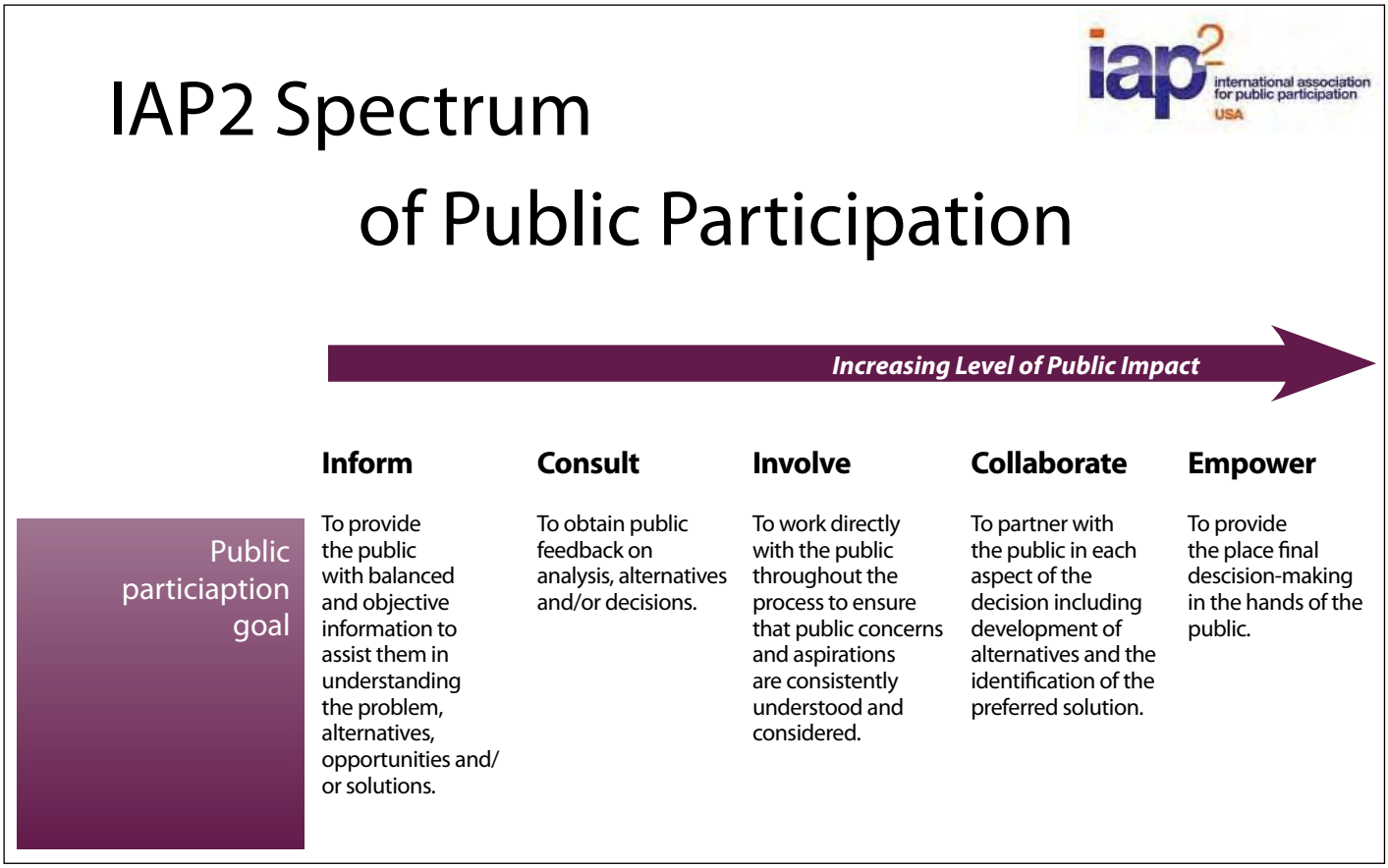

Figure 2: *IAP2 Chart of engagemnt goals.*

forth. But they are far less used to allowing citizens to genuinely influence a decision or plan. In our experience the most successful planning encourages and enables citizens to shape and refine plan development up to final reviews and approval.

A very different shortcoming we see in some public meetings is policy makers or planners asking very open-ended questions: "What are the most important issues?" "What do you want to see in the future?" There is a time and place for assessing all of the opportunities and challenges in a community. And there is a time and place for identifying what people envision for their future. However, done poorly, this leads to discussions about issues that are not that closely linked to the policy questions at hand, to the plan that needs to be developed, or to the resources that are realistically available. And when this is done poorly, it both raises expectations about what will get addressed and, ultimately, skepticism about participating in a public process when results don't transpire.

We believe it is absolutely essential when organizing community engagement to link the public's directions and decisions directly to a plan's development. This requires putting something on the table that can genuinely be influenced by the public input. It also requires clarity and transparency about what is fixed and cannot be influenced. The former can be difficult for those who are accustomed to not involving the public in a meaningful way to influence decisions. The latter can be difficult, especially for elected officials that want to appear responsive to anything the public says.

We recommend that at the beginning of the project, and as it evolves over time, to continually ask yourself:

- What are the decisions that need to be made now?
- What information do participants need to consider the options?
- And what input do I want from people to help inform that decision?

A guide we have found useful in clearfying the purpose of public engagment was created by the International Association of Public Participation (above).

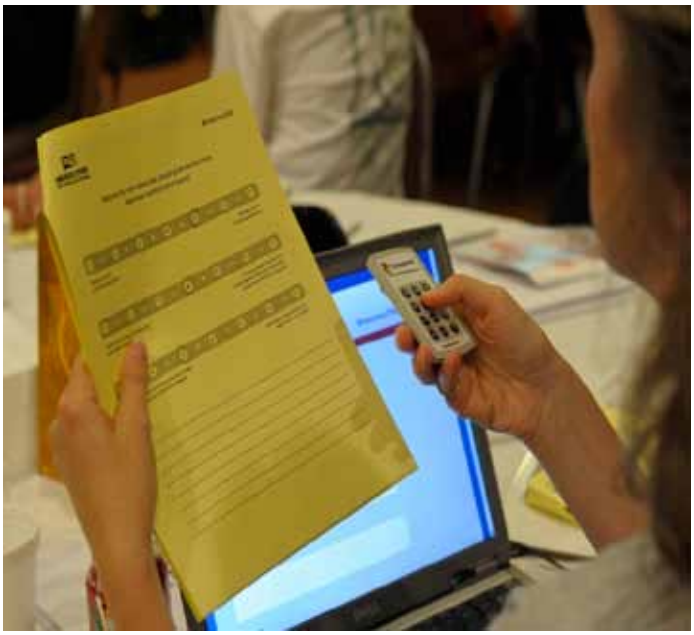

Figure 3: (Above) *Participants prepare for map-based discussion at forum.*

Figure 4: *(Above right) Participant polling preferences from options on thier worksheet*

Public participation occurs across a spectrum. Each element along the spectrum can have high value in community engagement. But it is critical to be intentional in your actions about where you need to be along the spectrum.

None of this is to suggest that the decision-making authority is transferred to the participants (unless you are on the empower end of the spectrum, which is very rare). In planning and in most policy-making arenas, there are many other factors that need to be assessed. And in the end, it is the elected officials and policy makers that must make the final decisions, but they must do it with the best information they can acquire from meaningful public input just as they do with professional planning expertise from staff and consultants.

After the input has been received, other factors considered, and decisions made, the transparency must continue with elected officials and planners making clear what the final decisions are, why they made them, and how public input factored in. They need to show what they were able to include from the public input, and just as important, what they could not include and why.

Making this link between community engagement and decision making helps build higher levels of collaboration and shared responsibility between government, citizens, and other stakeholders. This is especially important when broad public support and multi-sector support is required for successful plan implementation. Proclamations are often made about the importance of diverse voices being a part of public processes. Then there is the counter retort that "We advertise public meetings, but nobody comes!" Often planners don't know how to recruit diverse groups of people to public meetings, and certainly not in ways that are representative of the community.

So, why is diverse representation important? First, it is the right thing to do. If a plan is being developed that will impact a community, all perspectives should be heard. Second, engaging all perspectives can increase the chances of successful implementation, because the plan will have broader community support and more credibility with elected officials. The community will feel greater ownership of the plan and take greater responsibility for implementation. Finally, it makes for better decisions and plans. The challenges facing planning and so many other policy issues are complex and cross-sector. Good strategies require input from as many different perspectives as possible.

Diversity across stakeholder groups is reasonably straightforward. Most planning efforts we have witnessed have some structure such as a task force or committee to engage people with expertise and a stake in different areas, including environment, housing, and business, among many others. Representatives from these areas engage in discussion with planners and with each other

***Figure 5**: Participants observing instant polling results.*

to protect their concerns. They read draft materials and provide input. This effort usually goes well, though conflicting interests can be hard to manage.

Diversity across the general citizenry is generally more challenging. How do you get a large and diverse group of citizens engaged? How do you get a diversity of people in one room together? What is the diversity that we should be aiming for? In what ways do we plan to engage residents and how will that differ with the way we engage other stakeholders groups.

One note here about residents vs. stakeholders. When we talk about engaging residents (or citizens) we are talking about members of the general public that do not represent any particular interest except perhaps their own. When we talk about stakeholders, we are talking about individuals or organizations that are representing a specific interest or set of interests: preserving biodiversity, supporting business growth, advocating for lower-income housing, etc. Of course, the boundary between the two is not always clear. Almost all of the people representing stakeholder groups are residents, and many of the residents have certain issues that are more important to them than others. However, the distinction has been helpful to us, and we believe that planning efforts need to increase the level of engagement with residents while maintaining good engagement with stakeholder groups.

Many planners will shy away from speaking directly about engaging a diverse group of people across race and income. They tend to use less specific references and say "we want to engage those that have been under-represented or not involved in previous planning efforts." It is okay to use this language sometimes, but planners also need to be explicit and intentional to achieve the diversity they are aiming for.

What diversity should planners engage? We believe the best answer is that participants should match as best as possible the demographics of the community along age, race, income, and gender. We have not seen a meeting or project that scored perfectly on all these, but we have seen many that get close, and that is a big improvement over most efforts.

What does this mean at a practical level? It means you need to set clear targets for your engagement efforts. Usually you can use recent U.S. Census figures. It means developing strategies for engaging each different demographic, especially the "hard to reach". It also means tracking how well you are doing achieving your targets.

People often ask us what we suggest for engaging the hard to reach. Many factors are important, but the truth is that the hard to reach are (unfortunately) hard to reach. To use a tired but true cliché, the most important factor is not what you know, but who you know. When you engage racial minority groups or low-income people, you have

Figure 6: *(Right) Participants engaged in discussion at workshop*

Figure 7*: (Far right) Participant studying a discussion guide*

to work with people they trust. This usually leads to churches, community based organizations, and other "grass-top" leaders. When a minister in a church suggests on Sunday morning that the community should get engaged, it goes a lot further than a PSA or flyer.

In our work, and in our recommendations to others, we engage these local organizations and leaders very early in our planning efforts. We bring them on board in ways that allows them to give some input to the way we do public engagement. We position the project so that it is worth their time and effort to be involved and ask the members in their community to be involved. In many cases, where we want a community organization to do a lot of outreach, we will offer stipends to cover some of their time.

Another helpful tactic is to hire community organizers. These are usually individuals who already have some connection with the community. They can help gain access to local organizations and spend time working the community, attending meetings, and knocking on doors to talk with people and get them engaged.

All of this probably sounds labor intensive. It can be, but a little bit can go a long way. One way we have found to reduce costs on some of our larger projects is to recruit and train "semi-volunteers". These people, we sometimes call them Ambassadors, receive a small monthly stipend and training from us to reach out and engage their community. These people usually have other jobs, but want to be more involved in their communities, have free time in the evenings and weekends, and appreciate the small amount of money and training they receive.

Aside from this outreach, the other important facts for engaging the hard to reach are more about logistics. When you can, meet people where they are, in their communities. Go to the churches and community meeting places they already know. For big meetings, provide support services, from language translation to childcare and transportation assistance. Community based groups can also help with "turn-out logistics" such as providing car and van pools to your events.

Achieving diverse representation helps build legitimacy for the community engagement and the planning activity in the eyes of elected officials, community leaders, and the public.

Informed Participation

As a general rule, planners are more experienced with public meetings and public engagement than public officials in other policy areas, and are better at providing useful and timely information in public meetings. The challenge frequently, though, is that the information is often too dense or detailed and too laden with jargon and "insider" terminology, all of which can overwhelm and confuse an earnest gathering of citizens. Thus, there are important questions to consider when

preparing for the "content" of a public meeting:

What is the "frame" for the information? How will it be organized and towards what outcome? This is connected with how engagement is linked to decision making, which was discussed above.

- What is the minimal amount of information that participants need to understand this frame and the relevant issues?
- What are the best methods for conveying this information that are accessible and engaging?

In short, seek to make that four-inch think study into four-page briefs and articulate presentations, considering these communication issues in the process:

Right Amount of Information: Planners and other meeting organizers sometimes error on the side of providing too much information, so much that the critical bits of information get lost. Other times they error on the side of not enough information and the public might feel the planners are not being transparent. Focus on the right amount of information and best methods to convey the necessary background information and most relevant data

Clear and Simple Materials: Presentations, maps and other materials need to provide just enough context so that people have some shared understanding of the situation and focus very quickly on the most important issues and questions. This information needs to be presented in a clear and simple manner to be accessible to as many people as possible.

Maps Accessible to the Layperson: Maps are a great tool, but planners need to remember most people do not have anywhere near the same level of experience reading maps. A good base map is almost always useful to help people get oriented to the geography but be prudent with how many GIS layers you include.

Tools that Leverage Learning: Here the new digital and GIS tools can help organize, animate and guide the public through a learning process and raise their level of effective participation.

Planners have a strong desire and appreciation for the need to help citizens better understand the context, the issues, and the impact of different choices in planning. However, they need to remember that residents will only be able to absorb and understand so much. Focus on the most critical information to convey, and invest resources to make that information clear and accessible. This builds an important foundation for much more successful community engagement.

Good Meeting Design and Facilitation

Once you've implemented an effective plan to ensure a turnout of diverse citizens, and once you've streamlined what is critical to be presented and how, one more factor determines the level of success of your public engagement: how you deliver it. Public meetings are not the only way method of community engagement, but they will always be an important component. We always say that 50% of great facilitation is having the right meeting design. Meeting design is much more art than science, and one improves their art. Critical to the design process is understanding what cultivates positive group dynamics for the meeting.

There are many places meeting design can go wrong. An opening that does not make it clear what the meeting is about can confuse people. A long and detailed presentation can drain everybody's energy. Poorly worded discussion questions or instructions can send people working in different directions. Allowing one or two people to dominate the conversation can frustrate everybody else. Over the years, we have found the following design principles to be most helpful:

Balance Presentation & Engagement: Balance the right amount of information presentation with table discussion and other types of interaction. Too little presentation and citizens have insufficient guidance to hold a good conversation; too much presentation and citizens are potentially either overwhelmed and don't know where to start or they are left with too little time to engage in good conversation.

Right Discussion Questions: Pay close attention to discussion questions. We almost always conduct a focus or simulation group prior to a public meeting so we can test the questions we plan to pose. Sometimes we realize we're way off; sometimes we realize we just need a few tweaks. A good discussion question leads to quality discussions and helps yield the input, ideas, or perspectives you hope for. A poor discussion question can lead to group frustration either because it is too open-ended, too limiting, or too confusing or ambiguous.

Right Tools: Find the right tools for each meeting (and whether they are even necessary) and the right timing for each tool. For example, like many planners, we use polling keypads frequently at our meetings. Just like a great deal of forethought is invested in the right discussion questions, the same goes for polling questions. Polling questions can be used to ascertain who is attending (and how that compares to local demographics), what are people's priorities (either of what you provide or what they self-generate), how they evaluate various options being considered, and so on. Providing the context is critical, as is the actual framing of the question, and the options or scales you choose. We never treat the use of keypads casually, nor do we any tool we use. Invest the right time upfront to figure out what purpose it will serve, what outcome you seek, and process will best yield the desired result.

Invest Real Time in Design: In our experience insufficient attention is paid to putting together the right agenda for a meeting. Most members of the public prefer a well structured meeting with clear objectives and clear guidance on how to participate. Developing the right sequence of activities requires an iterative design process. We will go through several draft meeting designs before settling on the right one.

Excellent Facilitation: Select someone who has strong facilitation and moderation skills to lead the meeting. Good facilitators can both cre-

ate the right tone and environment as well as 'hold the space' so that citizens know what is expected from them. They are welcoming, clear, intentional, and open. They give people a sense of purpose for their work and a sense of appreciation for what they share, both the positive and the negative. Some agencies have skilled facilitators internally; some don't. You might not always be able to find or provide a quality, neutral facilitator for your meetings, but especially when the stakes are high use of an outside skilled facilitator can be the difference between a successful and a disappointing meeting.

One final note on facilitation, we have found that often planners are better served during a public meeting if they can quietly and carefully listen to what others have to say and respond to feedback (praise and critique) from a position as the expert planner and not as a facilitator of the meeting. Letting someone else facilitate can liberate you to play the other critical roles you need to play to move a planning process forward.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, we have found that it is essential to get a critical mass of diverse citizens involved in significant ways throughout a planning process. It is hard work, but well worth it. During the engagement process, we help citizens digest complex issues to ensure the choices to be evaluated make sense and the dialogue is informed and practical.

By bringing citizens together in productive forums, in which the right conversations are effectively framed, we are able to help citizens move beyond their differences to find common ground, thereby increasing the likelihood that effective engagement leads to shared priorities, clear recommendations, and broad support for the planning effort.

We have a great respect for urban planners. They typically do more community engagement than most other areas of government. We know that planners have also made important progress in employing good methods (small group discussion, keypad polling) for successful public meetings.

As regional planning continues to grow in importance, and as more elected officials and policy makers act on the need for regional collaboration and decision making, good citizen engagement practices and tools will become increasingly important to deal with increasingly complex issues.

About the Authors

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