# Chapter 3: Public Engagement and Outreach

*Designing Healthy, Equitable, Resilient, and Economically Vibrant Places*

*"Cities (and counties) have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."*

*--Jane Jacobs*

## Introduction

Robust community engagement is a vital component of drafting and updating a general plan. When a general plan is written or amended, state law requires the planning agency to "provide opportunities for the involvement of citizens, California Native American Indian tribes, public agencies, public utility companies, and civic, education, and other community groups,"which may include public agencies, public utility companies, community groups, and others through hearings or other appropriate methods (§65351)The law also requires that a jurisdiction make a diligent effort to include all economic groups when drafting, adopting and implementing its housing element (§65583). For the purposes of this chapter, the term "update" will refer to adopting new general plans as well as updating existing ones.

By law, cities and counties must hold at least two public hearings before adopting a general plan: one by the planning commission and another by the legislative body (either the city council or the board of supervisors) (§65353, 65355). However, this minimal number of hearings does not constitute what most planners would consider an adequate public participation program for adopting or updating a general plan.

As mentioned throughout the GPG, there is great opportunity to collaborate in innovative ways with different public agencies, private entities, elected officials, and community members. A general plan update affects every aspect of a community and broad participation is important- particularly direct or representative participation of local citizens.

Many entities have recognized the benefits of strong community engagement to improve local conditions, inform policy, enhance equity, and result in better program outcomes.[i]

Creating the opportunity for community dialogue throughout the general plan update-although challenging- can result in a much more informed and widely embraced plan.

As stated in Chapter 2, a general plan should start with a community's vision, but community engagement should not stop there. The general plan update must be treated attentively throughout the process from the beginning stages of the visioning process to adoption, depending on the scope and extent of the project.  A thorough update for an average-sized city is typically at least a year-long endeavor. The nature and intended outcomes during the outreach process will be different depending on the stage of the update:

1. **Exploration:** The initial stages of outreach allow stakeholders to identify community strengths, assets, priorities for future development, areas for improvement, and start the process of formulating a vision for the future.

2. **Collaborative Action:**  After a general baseline of community goals is established, the next phase allows for collaborative engagement with partners regarding different options for consideration, and how the policy priorities align to move toward attaining the future vision.

3. **Decision Making:** During the later stages of an update, various policy priorities have emerged to achieve the intended general plan vision, and it becomes paramount to orient policy options into a framework and select priority policies to move forward with the draft plan.

This chapter discusses various issues planning departments can consider when designing a public engagement process.  It also provides tools and lists resources to inform the outreach process and ensure community involvement, input, and support for the general plan.

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**Innovating for Sustainable Communities**

US Department of Housing and Urban Development

Collective Impact is an engagement model that multiple sectors can use to achieve positive change that is composed of strategies aimed at improving difficult social, economic, and environmental problems. At its core, it recognizes the importance of cross-sector collaboration, as well as bringing private, public, and citizen partners together to achieve meaningful outcomes. Core strategies include, "building a common agenda, creating shared measurement systems, identifying mutually reinforcing activities, promoting continuous communications, and supporting backbone organizations." City and county planning departments around the US implemented this strategy at a time of significant fiscal constraint during the economic downturn in 2008 as part of the Partnership for Sustainable Communities with the Department of Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Environmental Protection Agency.

Through broad public engagement, co-learning, and leveraging financial resources many lessons resulted and highlighted the power of long-range planning to improve economic resilience, integrate equity into planning, and foster collaboration with new entities- such as health and arts to achieve sustainable communities.

A vision at the beginning of the planning process is vital to frame the planning priorities and implementation plan. These lessons are applicable to establishing a vision in a General Plan Update.

http://www.frbsf.org/community-development/files/ci_vol26no1-The-Sustainable-Communities-Initiative.pdf

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## Process Design

Designing the outreach process before starting a general plan update is helpful to ensure adequate input from various stakeholders. In addition to any organized participation activities, state law allows the public to attend all meetings of appointed advisory committees, planning commissions, and local legislative bodies, with a few exceptions (Brown Act, §54950, et seq.). Unexpected events can occur during an update, including changes in elected leadership, funding, staff, etc. Having an outreach plan in place will help keep the process on track. This section provides guidance for developing an outreach plan.

### Establish an outreach strategy

A road map is an important tool to plan public engagement efforts throughout the process. Local jurisdictions vary tremendously throughout California, and engagement strategies will

also vary based on local circumstances. Local communities should help define the outreach strategy most relevant to their needs. However, there are some issues to consider across planning for all areas.

These include:

- Funding available for engagement activities
- Timeline for activities
- Expectation-setting for stakeholders
- Staff time and knowledge and other expertise to conduct outreach and education
- Communication tools available
- Process to ensure efforts are transparent, accessible, and fun
- Methods available to capture and record the dialogue
- Translation services
- Variety of meeting spaces

Some helpful tools in outreach include:

### Oversight responsibility

Assigning a staff member to oversee and be responsible for the engagement and outreach process will ensure dedicated attention to this important procedural step.

### Advisory Committee/Board

Establishing a [diverse advisory board](#) comprised of experts as well as community members to serve as advisors throughout the general plan update can be helpful by providing insight on how to reach multiple populations, addressing potentially controversial issues, understanding sensitive community needs, and representing a greater portion of the community. A manageable size board (<20 people) should include multiple voices from the communityGeneral plan advisory board members represent the varied interests the public engagement process hopes to capture, and should be drawn from the same communities that general outreach will target.

The following categories of advisory board members should be considered:
- Business leaders and/or representatives from Chambers of Commerce

- Local agency leaders including water agencies, fire departments, health officers, public works leads, and others
- Community development and health leaders
- Representatives and advocates from various income groups, special needs populations and neighborhoods in the jurisdiction
- Multi-lingual representatives
- State and/or federal agency leaders if the jurisdiction has a high proportion of public lands

### Survey of overlapping efforts

Multiple public engagement processes may be in process simultaneously. For instance, outreach to solicit input on an application for grant funding may occur at the same time as outreach to update the general plan. This can confuse participants, and pose a potential challenge for recruitment and involvement. Additionally, other public or private agencies (for example, Parks and Recreation, Hospitals, Departments of Public Health, Non-Governmental Organizations) may be conducting outreach simultaneously. Increased awareness of ongoing efforts to gain input can help avoid overlapping or conflicting outreach efforts and might even allow outreach sessions to be combined.

### Scale

Outreach for a county general plan is a much larger undertaking than for a city, due to the larger catchment area. Also, stakeholders may have less of a perceived stake in the process since county general planning is further removed from their local jurisdiction. Relating the importance of participation back to the group and sharing how the information will be incorporated into the planning process can help increase participation.

### Partnership

All affected stakeholders should be represented in any public participation process. In a general plan process, this is the entire community. Stakeholder groups in the general plan process may include:

- Community and neighborhood groups
- School districts
- County Transportation Commissions

- Utility and public service providers
    - Energy
    - Water: water supply, wastewater, flood/stormwater districts, IRWM, Sustainable Groundwater Agency, reclamation district, etc.
    - Telecommunications
    - Waste
- Regional groups that can identify synergies with other regional efforts
- Affordable housing and special needs population representatives and advocates
- Non-profit and for-profit builders
- State and federal partners as appropriate
- Educational institutions
- Industry and business
- Civic and community service organizations
- Non-governmental organizations
- Religious communities
- Existing boards and commissions, such as planning boards, parks and recreation, etc.
- Other public agencies
- Topical experts:
    - Groups working on climate change
    - County Health Departments
    - Environmental justice groups
    - Tribal leaders
    - Innovation or Technology Officers
    - Local food sources
    - Agricultural community members

### **Cultural Considerations**

Cultural differences can be present between and among professional groups as well as between and among community members. Reaching out to different professional groups and organizations not traditionally involved in planning occasionally presents its own set of challenges. It is important to account for different interaction norms, priorities, levels of comfort with professional terminology, and expectations for project completion.

It is important to consider cultural considerations throughout the design of community engagement, including overt differences such as literacy level, socioeconomic status, and language, as well as nuanced differences such as local history and cultural norms. Designing a process that is sensitive to all of these considerations can help encourage broader, more equitable and informed participation.

***To ensure equitable outreach, the following factors should be considered:***

> **Literacy Level:** It may be more difficult to reach out to foreign-born community members or groups with a lower level of formal education using written materials. It is important to design outreach materials and events to accommodate different literacy levels as well as provide background information when necessary if referring to complex concepts.

> **Socioeconomic Status:** Lower economic groups are often disproportionately affected by environmental hazards, but also face more barriers to participation in community engagement efforts to help remediate them.  Factors such as location and accessibility by public transportation, timing of outreach, availability of childcare, and availability of food can affect the ability of groups to attend events.  Reviewing demographic data, such as available in the [American Community Survey (ACS)](#), can help identify potential needs of each community.

> **Language***:* All communication should be done in all of the major[2] languages spoken in the community. This includes any advertising and written background materials as well as live translation at key public events. Some documents, such as the draft general plan or the draft environmental impact report associated with the general plan, may be infeasible to translate in their entirety. In such cases, the planning agency should consider translating an executive summary into the major languages spoken in the community. Translators should be available at meetings when it is clear that non-English speaking members of the community will be present. Many local

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[2] The definition of "major" varies.  Some agencies define a major language as 10% or more of the population speaks the language.

non-profit organizations can provide minimal or low cost translation services for public benefit effort.

**Age:** Aging populations have specific needs and it is important to capture their input in the outreach process. Considering time of day and location of events, as well as ADA access to events and services available at the locations is important in including elderly residents. The needs of young residents must also be considered, including outreach methods such as social media and online platforms, location access and amenities, and innovative tools for discussion at events.

**Local History:** Certain communities may have participated in previous outreach efforts that did not result in change.  Over time, either not being included or participating and not feeling like the input was utilized can affect future participation. Understanding the local context is helpful prior to beginning outreach. Establishing trust, which also can happen through partnership at the local level, can make the process more likely to foster dialogue.

**Cultural Norms:** California is rich in diversity.  Each city and county across the state is comprised of different ethnic groups from around the world.  From 1980-2010, the percentage of people of color, for example, increased  from 33.4 percent to 59.8 percent of the [population](). By 2040, 73.3 percent of the population will be other than Caucasian.  Some members come from groups that are not as familiar with democracy, the ability to openly share opinions, are used to different gender roles, or may be fearful to have conversations and dialogue recorded. It is hard to learn all of the cultural nuances for each group in the community, but working in partnership with local non-profits or other groups skilled at working across cultures can help ensure all groups are able to participate in a way that is participatory for them.

**Outreach Structure**

Community members and other stakeholders have many competing interests for their time. Allowing different levels and types of involvement into the process can help foster participation. For example, going to places where people already gather such as a community health or street fair, a cultural event, a public event at a local religious or community center, community event at a local school, etc, might allow attendees to share input without a large time commitment. This is an especially helpful mode of outreach when looking for feedback on specific topics, such as health, equity, and environmental justice. Meeting stakeholders in locations they are familiar and comfortable with can help to bridge cultural and trust gaps. Other more time intensive activities such as focus groups, charettes, and workshops can be available for stakeholders who are interested in providing more in-depth input.  The structure of the outreach strategy can also influence the transparency and continued communication throughout the process.  Ongoing information sharing can help maintain community relationships and build trust in the process especially if culturally appropriate communication methods are used. Web-based communications, for example, may exclude stakeholder groups without regular access to the internet.

**Data**

Data and data visualizations can be powerful tools to catalyze community engagement. Some local jurisdictions have used maps with geospatial data and charts to examine transit routes, map community assets and risks, or share health outcome information to allow community members to understand planning in a tangible context. Data presentations should be tailored to their specific audience.  For instance, some members might want to know much more about how the data is collected and specific details. Other stakeholder groups will be more interested in general associations and how the data fits into the process. Missing data must be considered alongside existing data. Including funds in the budget to collect data as the general plan process proceeds will help address identified gaps in data availability.

There are also methods to allow local citizens to collect data which can help make engagement more interesting as well as provide local data sets.   Tools such as walk audits, surveys of

**Next Door** is an online neighborhood social networking website founded in 2010. It is currently used by 1 in 3 neighborhoods across the US.

Established to provide a social media platform for neighbors, it has also been used by city governments to do outreach on community building events, public participation opportunities and public outreach. It is one of many potential online tools to help with a general plan update.

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building types, and community photos help with the visioning process for community improvement while increasing potential participation. Considering how this data is valued versus other data sets and sources-such as traditional data purchased from consultants-including how much weight it will carry in the process and how public contributors will be incorporated help ensure improved community data and input.

**On the horizon**

As technology has advanced in the private sector, people have become accustomed to using the internet and their personal cell phones to locate services, buy products, fund a project through crowd sourcing, and share their life on social media.  This constant and immediate interaction is changing the cultural norms for level of involvement with business, other community members, and ultimately with government agencies.  Groups such as Code for America build open source technology to improve access to government services.[ii] Some places are starting to use personal cell phones to do surveys of local conditions, tweet responses to proposed policy options, or even provide their commentary online for local city council meetings rather than participate in person. These innovations within local government are increasingly common.  As more local jurisdictions create Civic Innovation Officer positions to facilitate new ways of interacting with local government, planning departments as well will likely have new opportunities for engagement. As potential methods of engagement increase, jurisdictions should consider possible age and cultural differences in the rate of adoption of new technology and plan accordingly.

## Engagement Tools

There are a wide variety of engagement tools that can be used to inform and engage the community in a public participation process. Tools should be chosen based on the needs, strengths, and resources of the community. By using multiple techniques, a wide range of community residents may be reached. Community members who help develop the general plan will often become champions throughout the process, helping carry the plan through adoption and implementation. Below are examples of different tools that may be employed.

### Web Based Meeting and Engagement Tools

Webinars, online conferences, and internet collaboration tools allow for easy, convenient engagement with the public. People with busy schedules, families, or limited mobility may find participation simpler via web based tools, entering questions or comments based on their own availability. Web based tools range from simple online webinars or meetings to open forums, documents with commenting capability, and collaborative images for visioning. While some community members may not have access or interest in using online tools, including them in an engagement strategy may increase participation.

### Mailings- emailed or regular mail

Mailings can be used to advertise process, request input, or share information. Note that some notices must be mailed (§ 65091, 65092). The types of mailing used should be based on the goals sought to accomplish. Mass surveys or opinion mailings work well to broaden the range of participants in the process and can also share information about process scope, timelines, website links, data availability and issues. Newsletters work to keep the public updated on the progress of the process as well.  Some communities utilize existing mailing services such as utility bills to reduce costs.

### Surveys

Surveys are most often used in the beginning of a general plan process to help identify community issues and concerns and to identify residents' opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of their community. A survey can help identify issues to be addressed by the general plan and areas where residents would like more information. A good survey includes the public early on in the process, broadens the range of those involved by including residents who do not come to meetings, and publicizes the general plan process. A statistically valid survey, while more difficult to conduct, can be very persuasive to decisions-makers and the public. Including demographic questions in a survey will help identify any inequities in response rates.

There are a number of methods available to improve access and equity in surveys. Pilot testing the survey instrument with the advisory group or a diverse group of pilot subjects may solicit feedback to improve the form. The survey should be piloted in every language in which it will be ultimately offered, to ensure that translations are conveying the intended information. While this will add time to the process, it may ultimately improve public perception of the data collected.

Additionally, soliciting feedback on data interpretation may be useful before finalizing analysis. Because different interests may interpret the same data in multiple ways, providing an opportunity for discussion, feedback, and suggestions on how to analyze results may provide a stronger sense of transparency and trust in the process.

### Meeting, Workshops, and Events

Well-timed meetings help solicit input and keep participants informed. Meeting types can vary depending on purpose, participants, and a variety of other factors. In addition to regular meeting structures, project leads can include innovative methods such as story telling, games, and white board/paper activities to capture input. Meeting types include:

- Public hearings
- Town hall meetings
- Open houses
- Events in non-traditional places, such as farmer's markets, churches, health fairs, school events, and community fairs
- Panel discussions
- Neighborhood meetings
- Civic meetings such as chamber of commerce
- Focus groups
- Small in-home meetings

### Activities

Activities are a helpful tool to expand thinking and demonstrate new opportunities and possibilities. For example, engaging in a group walk and conducting a walk audit  (where

local residents physically walk around and collect standardized information about the condition of the built environment) could highlight infrastructure and safety needs. Activities can also provide group-learning opportunities and build relationships with community members and planning and consulting staff.

## Tours

Tours to other municipalities can show decision-makers and participants examples from other communities and help them visualize ideas for their own community, it is also a good way to experience parts of the city they may be less familiar with. Organized tours of recent or proposed projects within the community may also provide a good basis of discussion for decision-makers and participants.

## Open Houses

Open houses can allow community members to view plan proposals, data, and maps in a casual environment that also allows people to come and go as their schedules allow. Open houses can be held at a church, school, community center, local business, or other location easily accessible to the public. Planners should be available to talk informally about the planning process with visitors. Translators should be present as available. Open houses can be combined with other tools, such as written or visual surveys.

> The visioning process for Downtown Salinas started in December of 2008, through a collaborative public process to develop a consensus plan with the City. Multiple stakeholder and public meetings culminated in a design charette, engaging the community to identify ions in multiple areas, including safety and security, transportation and traffic, and open space.

## Community Image Surveys (Photo voice) and Taking pictures

Photos can accomplish the same thing as tours but work for larger groups and take less time. These surveys usually consist of pictures of civic buildings, housing, streets, and design elements that participants rate based on what they like and feel would work in their community.

## Design Charrettes

Design charrettes are also more interactive and visual. The public can participate with interdisciplinary teams of planners, architects, engineers, and artists or other local citizens. While charrettes are often used for specific plans and individual projects, they can also help

community members visualize what they want their community to look like. These preferences can then be translated into general plan goals and specifications. For more information on charrettes visit www.charretteinstitute.org/.