

Advancing a Standard for Processes that Include the Public

**Prepared for the Gateway Blueprint Project of
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RegionWise

RegionWise envisions a vital St. Louis metropolitan area where the possibilities for all people are maximized through the power of knowledge sharing, partnership, and monitoring the state of the region. To realize this vision, RegionWise applies evidence-based approaches to promote positive regional change.

RegionWise complements the renewal that St. Louis 2004 began. As St. Louis 2004 heralded innovation and the inspiration of civic commitment, RegionWise developed the structure to focus innovation and support a continuous improvement process. Its work is framed by the five goals originally defined by the St. Louis 2004 civic forums:

- People Safe and Healthy
- Children Prepared for Life
- Economic Security and Opportunity
- Social Justice and Racial Equality
- Enriched and Vital Lives

RegionWise produces an annual document, *One Region*, which explores the region's progress in meeting these five quality of life goals. Throughout the year, RegionWise releases reports that track local issues in their regional context. To facilitate access to the region's existing knowledge repositories, the initiative also maintains *RegionWise.org*. Web tools include annotated data links to statistical information, Interest Groups, *People Taking Action* stories, and periodic news articles to illuminate regional issues.

The initiative is funded by the Danforth Foundation.

ADVANCING A STANDARD FOR PROCESSES THAT INCLUDE THE PUBLIC¹

New England town meetings have long represented the American ideal of self-determination—democracy at its purest. Recently, however, when the small town of Gilford New Hampshire voted to replace town meetings with a representative form of government, it joined a long line of those who have abandoned this icon of public engagement.

In making this decision, Gilford residents yielded to the trend of dwindling public participation, a growing tendency that endangers the core of U.S. social values regarding community, accountability, and responsibility. This shift away from public participation impacts a variety of civic and community concerns in the St. Louis region as well, from the viability of elections and policy formation to community betterment and change initiatives.

During the last quarter century, attendance at public meetings has decreased by 35%, according to research published by Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government on its web site. But that's not the only decline listed among factoids gleaned by researchers of the school's Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America. For example:

- Family dinners and family vacations or even just sitting and talking with your family are down by one third in last 25 years.
- Having friends over to the house is down by 45 percent over last 25 years.
- Participation in clubs and civic organizations has been cut by more than half over last 25 years.
- Church attendance is down by roughly one third since 1960s.
- Philanthropy as fraction of income is down by nearly one third since 1960s.²

To Professor Robert D. Putnam, Saguaro Seminar leader, the above activities represent diminishing assets of “social capital.” Putnam defines social capital as “the collective value of all social networks...and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other....”³

Recent lackluster responses to St. Louis region efforts requesting public participation echo the disturbing national trend. Here, and around the country, researchers and practitioners concerned about the inert state of public engagement are attempting to diagnose the cause, as well as to invent new ways to motivate constituents and energize voters.

¹ The word *public* rather than *citizen* is used to reflect the inclusion of a growing number of newcomers whose presence makes them integral to actions and activities in their residence communities.

² The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, Harvard Kennedy School of Government, <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/factoids.htm>.

³ The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, Harvard Kennedy School of Government, <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/primer.htm>.

Motivation theorists suggest that when basic human needs for safety and security go unmet, the desire for higher order needs, such as community, just does not occur. Moreover, when desire for a higher order need does occur but is frustrated, individuals may focus their attention on increasing the satisfaction of a lower order need, which appears easier to satisfy. (This is known as the frustration-regression principle.)⁴ The result may be feelings of disconnection, disenchantment, or disenfranchisement.

Social scientists who study the issue of public engagement report that feelings of mistrust, misunderstanding, and disconnection seem to plague many such efforts. Researchers suggest that these unproductive outcomes are relationship concerns and must be addressed through sincere, systematic effort over time. The litmus test, they say, is whether people “feel engaged,” and their level of engagement relates directly to who makes the decisions and how.

Local practitioners who report difficulty obtaining genuine public participation say their efforts are often met with complaints about previous unsatisfying experiences. Fueled by perceptions that their input will be ignored, individuals express frustration and anger, saying things like, “Nothing is going to change anyway.”

Call It What It Is

Exploring the diverse range of efforts being promoted as *public participation* raises questions about how these projects are being communicated. Conveners operating from different interpretations cause confusion among themselves as well as their participants who can’t figure out what they are being asked to do.

Conveners must understand the risks of raising unrealistic expectations. They must do a better job of presenting their project goals and process limitations up front in order to reduce the potential for misunderstanding and disconnection. Any lack of clarity is counterproductive to building strong, trusting relationships. Greater clarity decreases the potential for frustration that could undermine motivation. The public will feel more satisfied.

The Conceptual Framework

We would like to offer a qualitative framework or tool to help conveners make more realistic decisions about the best approach for a particular project involving the public. The chart on the following page is an adaptation of the chart developed by the International Association for Public Participation Institute and presented on their web site.⁵

⁴ Alderfer, C. (1969). “An Empirical Test of a New Theory of Human Need.” *Psychological Review*.

⁵ International Association for Public Participation Institute, <http://www.iap2.org/practitionertools/spectrum.pdf>.

IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

Developed by the International Association for Public Participation

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT

POSITION*	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:
To market a particular point of view.	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:
We will take care of your interests.	We will keep You informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Spokesperson ● Advertising ● Public Service ● Speaker's Bureau 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fact sheets ● Web Sites ● Open houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Public comment ● Focus groups ● Surveys ● Public meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Workshops ● Deliberate polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Citizen Advisory Committees ● Consensus-building ● Participatory decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Citizen juries ● Ballots ● Delegated decisions

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I. Promotion

II. Participation

III. Public Engagement

* This column and the arrow graphic have been added to reflect the authors' description of the levels of public participation.

As indicated in the chart, we suggest that there are three levels of involving the public: Promotion (Level 1), Participation (Level 2), and Public Engagement (Level 3). These three levels represent a continuum of public involvement differentiated by the depth of relationship-building and the degree of decision-making power the convener is willing to share. Within these processes, the intensity of public involvement ranges from minimal—recipients of information—to the maximum of equal partner status in every aspect. Maximum involvement is intended to empower community members to shape and manage their own destinies. Conveners would provide knowledge, technical assistance, staff, and logistics to support the process rather than control its agenda.

The chart includes descriptors to help conveners determine where on the continuum a given project falls. Following are examples of how the various processes may be used.

Promotion—Level I

POSITION

This process refers to marketing a particular point-of-view. It is virtually one-way communication for the purpose of recruiting supporters or buyers. This might be a point of sale display, brochure, exhibit, junket, or tour. The buyer may take it or leave it.

INFORM

This process offers minimum public influence and is appropriate for disseminating information on a new product, service, or upcoming change or event. Decisions have already been made. The intent is to convey information, not to solicit input from the public. There is minimal chance for relationship-building.

Participation—Level II

CONSULT

This process offers the public the opportunity to comment with no guarantee that their comments will influence decisions. This process is appropriate for obtaining feedback on a proposed law, regulation, or other proposal having civic or community impact. Public comment is often used by governmental entities required to demonstrate the inclusion of public input regarding a proposed project or change.

INVOLVE

This process may consist of a multi-step methodology. Individuals are expected to participate over a period of time. There may or may not be an opportunity for deep convener-participant relationship-building. However, this more deliberative context assumes that the public's deliberations are critical in identifying or shaping actions or approaches. They make recommendations though, not decisions. Networking among participants may be high. An

example is a task force making recommendations for the provision of a community service such as after school care for children.

Public Engagement—Level III

COLLABORATE

This process consists of a partnership model offering participants a high level of influence. Participants usually represent a diversity of perspectives and have the expectation of genuine inclusion in a process designed to reach consensus on goals, objectives, or actions. Opportunity to build relationships among all parties is high. A course of action may be jointly recommended using an agreed-upon format. However, the convening entity retains ultimate decision-making power, ownership, and liability. Community advisory panels or committees are an example of this process.

EMPOWER

This process offers the maximum public influence, ownership, and decision-making power. It is full collaboration of all members, representing diverse interests and points of view. The convener and participants function as equitable partners in all aspects of the effort. Together, they define goals, identify and choose approaches, and make decisions using a consensus model. The convener agrees up front to abide by the collective decisions. The group as a whole is in control and accepts ownership and liability (within specified limits). This process is most useful for community change efforts because it empowers participants to use their intimate knowledge of local issues and concerns, as well as their values, norms, and behaviors to transform their community.

At this level of deep relationship-building across diversities, it is critical to take into account intergroup dynamics that may emerge. The body of knowledge around intergroup relations provides helpful advice in this regard. The following is a passage from *A Nation Divided: Diversity, Inequality and Community in America*:

Outside agencies coming into a local community to stimulate, initiate, or otherwise affect programs directed toward intergroup relations will meet minimum resistance when they: (a) work through local persons and established local groups; (b) avoid extensive publicity for themselves; (c) adapt techniques and organization to local circumstances rather than propose a rigid scheme prepared in advance.⁶

⁶ Moen, P., Dempster-McClain, D., & Walker, H.A. (Eds.). (1999) *A Nation Divided: Diversity, Inequality and Community in America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 293.

Those who work in the field have determined that, conveners of participatory public engagement should:

- Carefully consider power issues such as leadership, meeting times, and places.
- Value the range of knowledge community representatives bring to the table about the beliefs, attitudes, and daily life experiences of their constituents.
- Remain flexible: be willing to listen to participants' reactions to process, methodology, or practices.
- Don't assume that "economically deprived" means "brain deprived." Identify and use the skills that people bring with them. Use creative ways to fill any gaps.
- Use the services of an interpreter or "go-between" to facilitate effective communication across culture, discipline, or class.
- Be intentional about monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes.
- Jointly plan an exit strategy up front. This will not only save resources but it will help to sustain relationships even when things do not work out as planned.⁷

Conclusion

Public engagement is challenging but the potential for positive outcomes far outweighs the investment of organizational resources. When conveners are intentional about aligning their goals with the appropriate public engagement process, and when they are candid about their limitations, they can expect more favorable results. Participants will feel more satisfied and the potential for future collaboration will increase. More importantly, communities will be inspired to work cooperatively to shape their own destiny for a better future.

⁷ Adapted from Nyden, P., Figert, A., Shibley, M., & Burrows, D. *Building Community: Social Science in Action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. and *What You Say Matters*, The Education Trust, <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/C18491FC-962F-4C04-BA63-0B3993156D08/0/quotes.pdf>.