
CHAPTER 8

Public Participation

All statutory references are to the California Government Code unless otherwise noted.

When a general plan is written or amended, state law requires the planning agency to provide opportunities for the involvement of public agencies, public utility companies, community groups, and the general public through public hearings or other appropriate methods (§65351). The law also requires that a jurisdiction make a diligent effort to include all economic groups when drafting its housing element (§65583).

Statute requires two public hearings before a jurisdiction can adopt or amend a general plan: one by the planning commission and another by the legislative body (either the city council or the board of supervisors). 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.

People have come to expect that public participation—the process by which the public can give input or otherwise participate in decision-making—will be a part of any planning process. Excluding the public can be time consuming, expensive, and divisive. Failure to allow the public to meaningfully participate in planning decisions that affect their communities can result in litigation or ballot initiatives that may overturn the results of a general plan process.

There are many benefits to including ample opportunities for public input and involvement in a planning process. This chapter discusses these benefits, as well as ways to successfully engage and include the public.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

State and federal environmental justice laws and policies have further emphasized the need for public participation in the decision-making process. Concern that minority and low-income populations were shouldering a disproportionate share of environmental and health burdens led to President Clinton issuing Executive Order 12898 in 1994, which focused federal agency attention on environmental equity issues.

In 1999, California became one of the first states to pass legislation codifying environmental justice in statute. State law defines environmental justice as, “The fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, and in-

comes with respect to the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies” (§65040.12).

Section 65040.12 requires OPR to develop guidelines for cities and counties to address environmental justice matters in their general plans. The relationship between environmental justice and the general plan is discussed in Chapter 2. Although not expressly addressed by §65040.12, public participation is an important part of environmental justice. A well-designed public participation process allows planners, decision-makers, and the community to engage in a meaningful dialogue about the future development of the city or county.

OPEN MEETINGS

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.) For more information on Brown Act requirements, see the California Attorney General’s Office’s publication *The Brown Act: Open Meetings for Local Legislative Bodies* (2003).

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

There are many practical reasons to involve the public in the general plan process or in any other planning process. These include:

- ◆ Providing valuable information leading to more informed policy development by decision-makers.
- ◆ Insuring the plan’s successful implementation by building a base of long-term support with the public.
- ◆ Reducing the likelihood of conflict and drawn-out battles by addressing public concerns during the general plan process rather than on a case-by-case basis in the future. This can also speed the development process and reduce project costs.

Public participation as part of the general plan process can have positive impacts on the entire community, including:

- ◆ Educating the public about community issues.

- ◆ Increasing the public's ability and desire to participate in the community.
- ◆ Enhancing trust in government by strengthening the relationship between elected officials, government staff, and the public.
- ◆ Working towards community consensus and creating a vision for the future.
- ◆ Laying the groundwork for community revitalization and increased investment in the community.
- ◆ Obtaining public input regarding plan policies and community issues and objectives.
- ◆ Providing the public with opportunities to evaluate alternative plans and to participate in developing and choosing a plan that works for their community.
- ◆ Informing decision-makers about public opinion.

PROCESS DESIGN

A general plan process is a valuable opportunity to focus on current issues in the community. If you are strategic in your process design, your community can get more out of the process than just an updated plan. The following are some important points to consider when designing a public participation process:

- ◆ Public participation processes take time and resources. Dedicate adequate staff time and other resources to the process.
- ◆ Community members should be included in the general plan process as soon as possible. A visioning process, focus groups, or an advisory committee can be used to identify issues and involve the community before the process is designed.
- ◆ Participants need to know up front what they can expect from their participation and what the process sponsors will do with the information that comes out of the process.
- ◆ It is critical to understand the issues that are important to different segments of the community, including residents, business owners, and elected decision-makers. Address their issues and concerns during the process. Make sure that all stakeholder groups feel that they have an opportunity to give input early in the process.
- ◆ The process should be simple and transparent; participants should be updated frequently as the process moves forward.
- ◆ The process should be designed to meet the needs

of your community. No two processes should be the same. Questions to consider include: Will community members need childcare in order to attend meetings? Are residents more likely to participate on a weekend or early in the morning due to work obligations? Will providing refreshments influence more people to attend? How do community members get their information? How comfortable are they with technology? Is translation necessary?

- ◆ The entire process should be documented. This includes keeping a record of and reporting on all groups that have been contacted, any information that is used to inform the process, and all decisions that are made. Documentation can be done through media stories, a website, newsletters, or other materials in order to keep the public informed.
- ◆ The process should be as engaging, interactive, and fun as possible.

Sponsorship

It is important to the public that the process they participate in has an impact on the final product. Community members often do not participate in public participation processes because they suspect that their input will not be used or that the outcome of the process will be disregarded. In order to encourage the public to be involved, participants need to know that the process has the support of local elected officials and that decision-makers will respect the outcome. The city council, board of supervisors, or planning commission should act as the sponsor, providing its support and endorsement of the process. Trusted community groups can act as partners or co-sponsors in the process as a means to increase community support.

Inclusiveness

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.
- ◆ Utility and public service providers.
- ◆ Educational institutions.
- ◆ Industry and business.
- ◆ Civic and community service organizations.
- ◆ Non-governmental organizations.
- ◆ Religious communities.
- ◆ Other public agencies.

Planners should seek to engage the complete range of community interests, such as environmentalists, developers, the elderly, youth, lower-income residents, special needs populations, etc. Inclusive representation is critical in the planning process, as highlighted by the growth of the environmental justice movement. It is not enough to contact community groups. The process must be open and accessible to the entire community. This can be accomplished in a number of ways.

Language

All communication should be done in all of the major languages spoken in the community. This includes any advertising and written background materials. 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 necessary. Those conducting the process should avoid using jargon, which can make it difficult for participants to understand the proceedings and also can make translation difficult.

Advertising and outreach activities

Identify the outlets where different segments of the population get their information, such as the local newspaper, the radio, church, civic or social clubs, and schools. Work with community leaders to identify the best ways to advertise the process and events to their constituencies.

Location and time

Hold events in locations where participants feel welcome and that are familiar to them. This may mean holding meetings in several different neighborhoods. Work with stakeholders to understand which locations to choose. Some groups may feel comfortable meeting at local schools, while other groups may feel intimidated by schools. Meeting sites should be close to public transportation and comply with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Schedule a variety of meeting times based on the needs of your community. Working families most of-

ten attend evening meetings at which child care is provided. However, evening meeting times may not work for the elderly, young people, or those with special needs. They may also preclude participation by those with evening jobs. A mix of weekday, weeknight, and weekend meetings will allow all segments of the community to participate.

“The general plan update process is an opportunity to build community connections by bringing people together to work for a better future. It is also an opportunity to educate community members about their community and build a sense of pride.”

Bruce Race
Planning Consultant

Partnerships

Work with a variety of stakeholder groups so that their members feel comfortable participating in the process. It is important to identify and include groups whose rejection of the outcome will make adoption or implementation of the plan difficult.

Information

Participants should have access to information about the issues that are being addressed by the process. This information should be objective and fairly represent different planning alternatives. Providing adequate information helps participants work through emotionally charged and controversial issues. The process should allow time for participants to discuss the issues and the impacts of alternatives.

Communication

Communication between the community, the planning agency, and other process sponsors should be an interactive dialogue. Participants should be able to voice their questions and ideas to the process sponsors. The sponsors should respond to participant concerns.

TOOLS

There are a wide variety of tools that can be used to inform and engage your community in a public participation process. Pick tools based on the needs, strengths, and resources of the community. Use a variety of tools. Different people understand and access information in different ways. By using different techniques, you will reach a wider range of community residents. Below are examples of different tools you may wish to employ.

Mailings

Mailings can be used to advertise your process, request input, or share information. They can include:

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CASE STUDY: **Cutler-Orosi**

Cutler and Orosi are two unincorporated towns in Tulare County in the southern San Joaquin Valley. The majority of these low-income communities' populations are Latino: Cutler is 97 percent Latino and Orosi is 82 percent. Farmworkers make up a large portion of the population in both communities. The two towns are connected and intersected by a state highway, SR-63. In 2001, the Tulare County Redevelopment Agency received a Caltrans planning grant to redesign the highway to make it safer for all users, including automobiles, bicycles, and pedestrians. While not a general plan update, the community involvement strategies could be adopted for an update process.

PROCESS DESIGN

Working with the Local Government Commission, a statewide nonprofit organization, the redevelopment agency engaged in extensive community outreach to involve the community in the project. Tools and techniques included:

- ◆ A resident advisory committee to help plan the process. This committee, which already existed to advise on redevelopment issues, suggested that the workshops have a festive atmosphere, including food and music. They also let planners know which days and times would not work for community members.
- ◆ The formation of partnerships with community organizations that were already trusted by the community, such as churches, civic groups, and local advocacy groups.
- ◆ Focus groups with community partners and community members in a variety of accessible and unthreatening locations where residents were used to going, such as churches, community centers, multifamily housing complexes, peoples' homes, local restaurants, and schools.
- ◆ Youth activities to prepare for the design charrette, including a focus group with 5th graders and an activity with high-school students. This also helped to involve parents.
- ◆ Multiple methods of event advertising, in both English and Spanish, including:
 - Religious and other community groups announcing workshops to their constituencies
 - Advertisements in local newspaper
 - School districts sending home information with children
 - Caltrans posting the meetings on their portable road signs along the highway
- ◆ A design charrette activity consisting of two community meetings, one to collect input and the other to get feedback on the proposed design.

LESSONS LEARNED

Over 240 residents and stakeholders participated in two large community events and in several focus group meetings. The organizers credit their success to:

- ◆ Involving community members and organizations in the early planning stages and incorporating their suggestions in the outreach efforts and charrette activities.
- ◆ Identifying sources that the community uses to receive information and using those sources to advertise.
- ◆ Taking information to the community by holding workshops in locations that were accessible and familiar.
- ◆ Making workshops and information available in the languages of the participants.
- ◆ Designing workshops to appeal to the community.

A group of community residents is in the process of forming a nonprofit, the Cutler-Orosi Visioning Committee, to follow up on the recommendations of the charrette.

For more information contact:

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- ◆ Mass mailings with response coupons or surveys.
- ◆ Brochures inserted into local utility bills.
- ◆ Newsletters.
- ◆ E-mail announcements.

The types of mailing you use should be based on what you want 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, and issues. Newsletters work to keep the public updated on the progress of the process. E-mailed or mailed announcements or brochures are too short to contain detailed information and are best used to publicize the process or an event associated with the process, or to direct residents to locations where they can obtain more information.

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. Surveys can be designed to provide statistically accurate data or more qualitative responses. Surveys can also be in the form of interviews. In-depth interviews with selected stakeholders may help to supplement the results of a broader written survey.

Surveys can be distributed in a variety of ways, including:

- ◆ Mailing them.
- ◆ Including them in community newsletters.
- ◆ Inserting them in utility bills.
- ◆ Printing them in local newspapers.
- ◆ Leaving them in city hall or county offices, coffee shops, and other community gathering places.
- ◆ Posting them on a website.

One of the criticisms of surveys is that they solicit opinions from a public that may or may not yet understand the issues. Often, educational materials precede or are included with surveys to address this issue. 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.

Data

Providing good, unbiased information will help participants address complicated, emotional issues. Data and information can be presented through issue papers, case studies, reports, and scientific studies. The drawback is that this information is sometimes difficult to understand. Holding a workshop where topic experts explain the issues and answer residents' questions may help increase understanding of complex issues.

Partnerships

Partnerships are valuable ways to build community awareness and enthusiasm for a general plan process. Civic groups can encourage their members to participate, hold informational meetings, and distribute information.

General plan process events can be held in conjunction with other community events. You can set up a booth, distribute surveys, answer questions, and share information about the process.

The media can also be a partner. Media outlets can publicize the process by announcing and reporting on events, discussing the issues, printing educational information, and publishing surveys and their results.

Committees

Committees can be used to provide guidance and information and more intensive involvement in the day-to-day general plan process. They are not a replacement for outreach and activities that require wider representation from the community. Different types of committees can include:

- ◆ Focus groups to identify issues and help strategize on outreach efforts.
- ◆ Neighborhood associations.
- ◆ Task forces developed around the specific issues or elements of the plan.
- ◆ Planning advisory committees and technical review committees to provide specialized input.
- ◆ A steering committee to provide ongoing policy and process direction and to address any problems that may arise.

Meetings

Identify what you want a meeting's outcomes to be when you are designing it. Do you want community input, such as identifying issues and community needs? Do you want to share information? Do you

want feedback?

Think about how you want each meeting to move the process forward. For example, is your meeting intended to help identify the five highest community priorities or is it a meeting to build trust?

Plan meetings at key points during the general plan process based on the desired outcome. Tell participants what the outcome of the meeting is intended to be and how the information from the meeting will be used in the process.

Meetings should be held in a variety of locations to attract different segments of the population. Including refreshments will add to the cost of the meeting but may improve turnout and encourage participants to stay for the entire meeting. Community sponsors may be able to help with refreshments. On-site child care, while also an additional expense, may allow for the participation of more families, particularly at evening and weekend meetings.

Meeting types can vary depending on purpose, participants, and a variety of other factors. Meeting types include:

- ◆ Public hearings.
- ◆ Town hall meetings.
- ◆ Open houses.
- ◆ Panel discussions.
- ◆ Neighborhood meetings.
- ◆ Focus groups.
- ◆ Small in-home meetings.
- ◆ Planning fairs.

Workshops and Activities

Workshops can educate community members and help identify community values and issues. Community members who understand the issues can better participate in identifying feasible solutions. Many workshops use interactive activities and games to engage participants. Workshops can also consist of a series of speakers. Examples of activities may include:

Tours to other municipalities to show decision-makers and participants examples from other communities and help them visualize ideas for their community. 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 that allow community members to view plan proposals, data, and maps in a casual environment. Open houses can be held at a church, school, community center, local business, or other location easily ac-

cessible to the public. Planners should be available to talk informally about the planning process with visitors. Consider having translators present. Open houses can be combined with other tools, such as written or visual surveys.

Visual preference/community image surveys, which 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, which participants rate based on what they like and feel would work in their community. Pictures are a very powerful way to help community members understand the implications of general plan language. The surveys can be adapted to television or video format so community members can take them at their convenience.

Design charrettes and design workshops, which also allow participants to visualize issues and solutions. A charrette is an intensive, interactive design process where the public is part of an interdisciplinary team that can include planners, architects, engineers, and artists. This team meets for several days. They identify issues and needs and produce strategies and implementation documents for complex design and planning projects. 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. Design workshops, like charrettes, engage community members in visual problem-solving, but they are usually short in duration. For more information on charrettes visit www.charretteinstitute.org.

Visioning processes, which bring community members together to identify key community values and goals. The resulting vision statement should provide the broad goals to be achieved by the general plan. A visioning process can occur as part of the general plan process or can happen before the plan process begins. Starting the general plan process with visioning also will help to educate the public about issues facing the community and will lay the groundwork for evaluating plan alternatives.

Interactive games, such as creating physical maps showing where new development or desired community amenities should be built, which can help participants understand issues, appreciate different opinions, and actively participate in problem-solving.

Technology

New technologies are constantly expanding the tools available for public participation. However, technology

can be expensive and may not be the right tool for every process. Make sure that using technology adds to the effectiveness of your process. If technology is the right tool for your community but is unaffordable, there may be opportunities for your jurisdiction to partner with a local university, company, or non-profit organization to experiment with innovative technology.

Websites allow for information- and idea-sharing between the process sponsor and participants and among participants themselves. They are also a good way to keep people up to date on the process. Many jurisdictions use their city or county website to post information about the general plan process, such as progress, meeting dates and times, and supporting materials. A city or county may also choose to create a separate website specifically for the general plan process. Online technology offers the opportunity for community members to share ideas and ask questions and can allow for a greater number of people to participate without having to attend meetings or workshops. E-mail can be used to send meeting reminders and updates to the public, as well as to receive input on planning issues. However, not everyone has access to this technology. Always provide information in several different ways; for example, mail out a survey, send e-mails to those with Internet access pointing them to a website where they can fill out the survey, print the survey in the local paper, advertise the website address, and advertise a phone number where residents can call and request that the survey be mailed to them.

Electronic voting technology uses hand-held polling devices so participants can share their opinions with each other in real time at a meeting and give feedback to decision-makers. Some companies market electronic

town hall meetings. These meetings use electronic voting and other technology, such as networked laptops, instead of flip charts to share information and opinions more quickly.

Computer simulation and modeling lets the community see how proposed projects and policies would look. This can make new ideas easier to understand and support. Some communities are putting modeling programs on their websites and allowing participants to create and submit scenarios. Many of the modeling programs use a geographic information system (GIS) to map existing conditions. Examples of modeling programs include:

- ◆ The Index model, which evaluates proposed changes and their cost and impact on a wide range of issues, including traffic, the environment, energy use, and quality of life. For more information visit www.crit.com/index.
- ◆ PLACE³S, which is based on the Index software. It focuses on energy as a measure for how a plan will impact a community's environment and economy. For more information visit www.energy.ca.gov/places.
- ◆ CommunityViz, which is an interactive 3-D modeling program that uses planning data to create multi-dimensional images of proposed plans and alternatives. For more information visit www.communityviz.com.

The U.S. Department of Energy maintains an online database of community design and decision-making tools. To view this database, visit www.ncat.org/comtool. Another useful source of information on these types of tools is www.placematterstools.org.