

BY ASHLEY TRIM AND ROD GOULD

ENGAGING YOUR PUBLIC

Davenport Institute champions San Rafael's efforts

As a local government practitioner, you've heard a lot about public engagement during the past few years. You probably have your own public engagement success stories and your own stories about failing to properly engage residents.

These lessons learned have no doubt given you a sense of what is appreciated and works with stakeholders and what simply wastes everyone's time. We live in an exciting era of innovation and experimentation, but there is no secret formula for public engagement.

Some new policies and approaches work in some situations (and some communities) but backfire in others. It is trial by error and by fire in some cases, but there are certain characteristics that engaged organizations share. As you take proactive steps to strengthen resident and business involvement, do you know how you measure up?

The Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership has been focused for 10 years on finding and disseminating better ways to engage a wary public. Its staff and volunteers have been conducting research and training, offering grants, consulting, and championing those local governments that are leading the way in this growing field of study and practice.

Through these efforts, the Institute has identified 20 practices that are indicative of a public agency that takes public engagement seriously. It has made these available to local government managers through an evaluation platform and recognition program titled "How Are WE Doing?" (publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/davenport-institute/evaluating-engagement).

If you have a few minutes to explore the evaluation platform, ask yourself if your agency is using the practices and techniques listed and if others might be

worth incorporating into local operating policies and procedures.

If you feel that your organization is already undertaking many of the recommended actions, consider applying for recognition from the Davenport Institute. The application process is easy and the award could be a point of pride for your elected leaders, staff, and community. There are three levels of awards: silver, gold, and platinum. It's also free!

What Platinum Looks Like

On July 18, 2016, the Institute recognized the city of San Rafael, California, with its highest award (platinum) for public engagement. San Rafael, located in Marin County, north of San Francisco, has a long tradition of community involvement in city governance.

A fine cadre of resident volunteers are involved in city commissions, task forces, and community nonprofits. They work at civic events and volunteer for special projects. They are skilled, knowledgeable, willing, and can be counted upon to give their views of various policy decisions.

But San Rafael faces an all-too-common problem. These engaged residents comprise a fairly small cross section of the community. That means it is still fairly easy to rally several hundred people to derail a decision. Managers can probably think of examples of this playing out, swamping otherwise good policy making and leaving everyone raw from the experience.

So, how do you get more busy people involved in a time of increasing public distrust of government and other institutions? How do you get folks to work with and not against their local governments? Distrust paralyzes many communities, and good people don't want to work or volunteer for paralyzed communities.

As is often the case in civic reform, it takes a champion to get things rolling.

In this case, that champion was councilmember Kate Colin, who now serves as vice mayor. In 2013, Colin convinced the mayor and city council to convene a two-year subcommittee that she dubbed "Growing Resident Engagement and Transparency" (GREAT).

GREAT spearheaded a variety of community surveys, working groups, and listening sessions, along with a thorough analysis of the results. It culminated in the unanimous approval by the council in 2015 of a community engagement action plan that hinges on these five key strategies:

Demystify local government. Clarify local government processes and how to encourage effective participation in civic affairs. Better communicate the type of engagement sought on a given topic and how representative government effectively functions.

Engage earlier. Get the word out early to the community on projects and programs, including items on board and commission agendas, to increase participation prior to council meetings and with decisions.

Habla espanol. Improve communication and solicitation of feedback from the Spanish-speaking community.

Enhance technological tools. Use technology for improved communication, tracking, and online resources and engagement.

Close the feedback loop. Communicate better about the engagement process and the feedback that was received. Let people know about decisions and any follow-up actions or next steps.

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Now the city of San Rafael is actively implementing the plan's recommendations by:

- Assigning oversight of public engagement to a senior management analyst in the manager's office to coordinate citywide efforts. The analyst is supported by an employee committee of staff of the major operating departments.
- Exposing staff to ongoing training in effective public engagement strategies through attendance at various conferences, webinars, and podcasts.
- Using a variety of such communications strategies as newsletters, postings, e-notification, and other Web-based communication, social media, video updates, online surveys, video blogs, and mobile apps, plus always striving to use "plain language." San Rafael is currently developing a new website in an effort to be more user-friendly and to ease resident communication with the city.

members from groups not normally well-represented to serve on the community's myriad boards, commissions, task forces, ad hoc committees, working groups, and advisory bodies to increase diversity.

- Sharing power by sometimes convening meetings where the community is just one of several institutions and group partners at the table. Further, the local government allows the entire community to set the agendas for many standing monthly meetings (e.g., neighborhood association, business issues).
- Taking special efforts to reach out to such groups not usually in attendance as Spanish-speaking residents and youth, in order to achieve the widest possible representation of the community in public engagement efforts. Spanish language translation has been provided as well as snacks, free parking, and highly interactive and welcoming workshops. A high priority of the action plan is to further

- Making it easy to meet face-to-face with city leaders at library open houses, meet the city manager (farmer's market), meet the mayor (various locations), "Coffee with the Chief," and pop-up workshops at existing community events.
- Following up with participants in public engagement processes using topic-based e-mail lists. The city also periodically evaluates its progress toward the goals set forth in the community engagement action plan.

San Rafael has used advanced techniques for involving its residents in a variety of thorny issues, including the development of a homeless action plan, quiet zones for a new commuter train, business issues, labor negotiations, climate-change activities, safety facilities, sidewalk maintenance, downtown parking, and wayfinding.

While it doesn't always get it right, San Rafael reflects on its successes and failures and learns from both, thus upping its batting average. This builds credibility in the community that is in short supply in many cities, counties, and special districts. San Rafael certainly understands that work in this area is never done and that the city can always strive for better engagement.

If you are interested in improved public engagement, visit the Davenport Institute website at <https://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/davenport-institute> and check out the "How Are WE Doing?" evaluation platform and awards program. **PM**

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- Increasing transparency by offering both topic (e.g., pensions and labor negotiations) and project specific (e.g., development proposals and construction projects) Web pages. San Rafael also plans to soon display its financial data through OpenGov, to hold workshops and open houses on salient topics of the day, and to offer electronic updates to residents who register by topic of interest.
- Holding regular meetings with neighborhood associations, the business community, schools, and other community organizations.
- Working to actively solicit community

develop outreach tools for working better with members of the Spanish-speaking community.

- Partnering with schools, the local private college, and youth organizations to involve students and young adults in community building.
- Bringing in impartial facilitators when appropriate to build trust around public processes.
- Developing a *Guide to Public Meetings* and conducting a citizen police academy and a planning academy, as well as participating in the leadership institute of the chamber of commerce.



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