



International Association  
for Public Participation  
United States of America

**International Association for Public Participation—United States of America (IAP2 USA)  
White House Open Government Response  
January 3, 2012**

***Those potentially impacted by a decision should be able to impact that decision.***

The White House can most effectively measure its success in public participation by fulfilling this maxim. At minimum, public policymaking must involve the public's participation...

- in a meaningful way—more than merely to confirm a previously determined course of action or to let the public speak knowing they have no real influence. Participants must be given information to make informed decisions and know how their input affected that decision.
- in an inclusive way—a meaningful and effective public participation process must facilitate the involvement of all interested stakeholders, even those with limited time, access, or expertise to participate.
- in a fair way—recognizing that all Americans share the right to petition their government on a level playing field—where all voices can be heard.<sup>1</sup>

The United States affiliate of the International Association for Public Participation, IAP2 USA, provides tools, information and education about effective, authentic public participation processes for government, business, and nonprofit organizations. We offer the following recommendations to provide meaningful, inclusive, and fair processes for the public to participate in decisions that affect them. We also hope that this unusually brief opportunity to discuss public participation is only the beginning of this dialogue. We respectfully submit that the timeline and 'suggestion box' approach to this current opportunity from the administration is, in and of itself, a less than adequate means of gathering comment on this initiative.

Beyond the morality of involving the electorate in the work of the elected, public participation adds significant value in many other ways. Public participation ensures that policymakers and agencies adopt measures that best reflect the values and needs of the public. Experience and evidence shows that these policies are more likely to endure, and costly litigation or other acts

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the "Core Values for the Practice of Public Participation," International Association for Public Participation, retrieved 12-19-11: <http://www.iap2.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=4>

of public protest decline. Additionally, those in authority are more likely to gain the trust of their constituents when those constituents feel heard and their views respected; that added trust helps stabilize governments and strengthens mandates to lead.

IAP2 USA provides an array of tools that allow governmental agencies of varying size, budget, and staff to meet the participatory needs of their public(s). All public participation programs must meet the needs of the given publics, the challenges of the decision, and the resources available to the government and community. First and foremost is to understand the stakeholders whose voices need to be heard for the overall participation process to be meaningful. Assessing issues and gathering demographic information—including geography, ethnic and cultural background, and economic and educational status—ensures broad and fair public engagement. Sufficient data helps agencies to identify the diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds that should be brought to bear in the decision-making process. Additionally, public participation should include an evaluation protocol that enables the agency to understand the extent to which the impacted public understood the challenge being addressed, felt empowered to participate, and were heard.

The next step in public participation is to ensure that the public has the information they need to participate in a meaningful way. Agencies can draw from numerous tools to ensure that participants have access to common background information. Governmental television channels can produce briefings, on-air, online, and at in-person events, much the way a museum exhibit might feature an introductory video. Websites can incorporate “frequently asked questions” and customized introductions to topics based on a person’s stake (resident, business owner, etc.). School districts might send home materials with students for them and their parents, and outbound calling technology can reach multiple households with information. E-mailed, postal-mailed or other notices embedded into existing organizational newsletters are other ways to reach people. More complicated and controversial issues can use on-line and in-person workshops to allow for hands-on learning and dialogue. All of these notification and information tools serve to increase the number and diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds brought to bear in an agency’s activities and decisions.

A critical component of planning for public participation is to identify the level of potential influence the public can have in the decision. The IAP2 Spectrum<sup>2</sup> was developed in the 1990s to help agencies understand potential roles and influence of the public. At the lowest levels of public participation, the public might have limited or no potential influence on the decision. In such cases, government responsibility is to “inform” the public about the decision, its potential impacts, and how public concerns and values are addressed. As higher levels of public influence are appropriate, one moves from left to right along the spectrum to “consult”, “involve”, or “collaborate” with the public. At each level, public access and opportunities for input to the decision increase, starting with simple points of public input and moving to real opportunities for identifying areas of common ground and even consensus-building. At the highest levels of influence, using tools such as a voter referendum, the public is actually “empowered” to make

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<sup>2</sup> See “The Spectrum of Public Participation,” International Association for Public Participation. Retrieved 12-19-11 from [http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/IAP2%20Spectrum\\_vertical.pdf](http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/IAP2%20Spectrum_vertical.pdf)

the final decision. In general, the convening governmental agency determines the appropriate level of public participation, but engaging key stakeholders in this evaluation can dramatically improve the overall process. Ensuring that all stakeholders have clear expectations about their role and potential for influence in the decision process is a critical component for success.

With good information about the issue at hand and a clear understanding of roles and potential for influence, public participation can begin in earnest. IAP2 USA advocates the use a mix of facilitated tools and techniques to enable all those with an interest in the issues to participate. In smaller communities, simple meetings that generate genuine stakeholder dialogue might be the best approach. For larger or more controversial projects, technology that enables thousands to participate in a single conversation can help level the playing field for those unable to, or uncomfortable with, appearing publicly to voice views that may alienate them from their neighbors. Technology can help protect the privacy of the participant while, at the same time, allowing for additional comments or feedback on a set of defined alternatives (such as polling).

In the case of all face-to-face and technology-driven tools, their ability to add value to a public participation process hinges heavily on the involvement of a neutral process expert whose essential purpose is to enforce rules of civility and participation as agreed by participants; facilitate dialogue in a way that makes all participants feel welcomed and safe to contribute; and ensure that the input is conveyed accurately and transparently to decision-makers.

Success stories abound in public participation, and IAP2 tracks some of the best examples through its “Core Value Awards.”<sup>3</sup> Recognition includes a “project of the year” and “organization of the year” as well as “research awards” that fully evaluate public participation techniques and processes. Like-minded groups including the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), the National League of Cities (NLC), the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC), the Association for Conflict Resolution’s Environmental and Public Policy Section (ACR-EPP) and the Alliance for Innovation’s Transforming Local Government series provide other notable case studies of public participation processes.<sup>4</sup>

The practice of public participation takes many forms across every level of government. The U.S. National Action Plan would benefit by including values and standards for public participation. The Plan should acknowledge the benefits of both “traditional” interpersonal tools like community meetings as well as always-emerging technical tools. The Action Plan should include recognition that the public will influence different decisions in different ways, will receive information through various channels, and will seek differing levels of participation. Above all, IAP2 USA asks that the Open Government National Action Plan firmly focus on the need, and the many benefits, of providing all those impacted by a decision with a chance to impact that decision, supported with the information they need to do so. That focus, and the subsequent

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<sup>3</sup> See “Core Value Awards,” International Association for Public Participation, retrieved 12-19-11: <http://www.iap2.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=472>

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for list of web addresses.

achievement of that goal, can transform democracy in America.

## **Addendum**

Additional Case Study Resources:

- National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD): <http://ncdd.org>
- The National League of Cities (NLC): <http://www.nlc.org>
- International City/County Management Association (ICMA): <http://icma.org>
- National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC): <http://www.ncoc.net>
- Association for Conflict Resolution's Environmental and Public Policy Section (ACR-EPP): <http://www.acrepp.org>
- Alliance for Innovation's Transforming Local Government series: <http://transformgov.org/en/home>