

Elevating Public Participation

Every planner knows public participation is fundamental to our work—it is in our code of ethics, our academic training, and our laws. And we have all heard the warning stories of projects that have failed for lack of critical stakeholder involvement or knowledge. Yet often our practice of participation is shallow and perfunctory, or even completely ineffective.

As planners we need to elevate our practice of and commitment to public participation.

For many of our projects, the demands are great and the funds are low. We believe in public participation, but it is just one piece of the complex planning projects we manage. We are scrupulous about the legally mandated requirements, but it is well documented that routine public hearings are not conducive to community dialogue and problem solving.

Participation has received some bad press lately because some see public involvement as an obstacle to change, or they worry that decisions based on public input are made purely on the basis of narrow self-interest or often repeated untruths. I fear this could fuel a backlash.

We need to critically assess our own role in these processes. Taking participation seriously, we can invest resources in designing ethical approaches, including diverse views, and supporting equitable outcomes.

Of late, if engagement gets attention it is all about a new technology. There is a real danger of getting swept up with these tools because basic principles, not technology, should lead the process. My recent experience in a marginalized low-income neighborhood reinforced this observation. Our CPAT group [APA's Community Planning Assistance Team] developed a survey tool and went to residents with the survey on tablets (no data entry needed!) and some hard copies. The old-fashioned paper copies were overwhelmingly preferred and the tablets went back in the box.

My take-away is: be flexible. Good practice means we must match the approach to the context and population. Certainly new technologies integrated into a well-developed participation plan may expand our reach or enrich the experience. However, our primary obligation is to design an effective, high-quality, inclusive engagement process.

Sister organizations such as the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, National Civic League, Deliberative Democracy Consortium, International Association for Public Participation, and International Association of Facilitators can help. These groups offer webinar training, case studies, research results, and modeling by professionals with engagement expertise.

I am not actually a Pollyanna about engagement. I acknowledge there is truth in the critiques. I know engagement can be lengthy and costly, and some individuals wear blinders while others build opposition on inaccuracies. Further, land-use decisions involve a technical and legal understanding that exceeds the common knowledge of most residents.

There's a wider societal phenomenon at play: Americans need civics lessons that go beyond how to express self-interest; they need to know how people can work together as a community. Planners can help. Meaningful engagement may require that participants learn new concepts, gain a wider understanding of the workings of government, or develop the skills to critically evaluate claims. The benefits of participation are well known: inclusion of voices that are too often unheard, better decisions due to enhanced information, support for implementation, and more efficient permitting. But planners bear an added responsibility for doing it right. The public's experience in our engagement processes can color their attitude toward government as a whole and affect future—planning and nonplanning—participatory processes.

Finally, we need to standardize evaluation as part of the process. A project should not be considered complete until we have assessed the effectiveness of its public involvement. Our response to engagement challenges should not be less participation, but better participation.



Marijoan Bull, AICP, is an associate professor of geography and regional planning at Westfield State University in Westfield, Massachusetts. She has 23 years of professional planning experience in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, has participated in two CPAT projects, and is currently a board member of the International Association of Public Participation.

Marijoan Bull