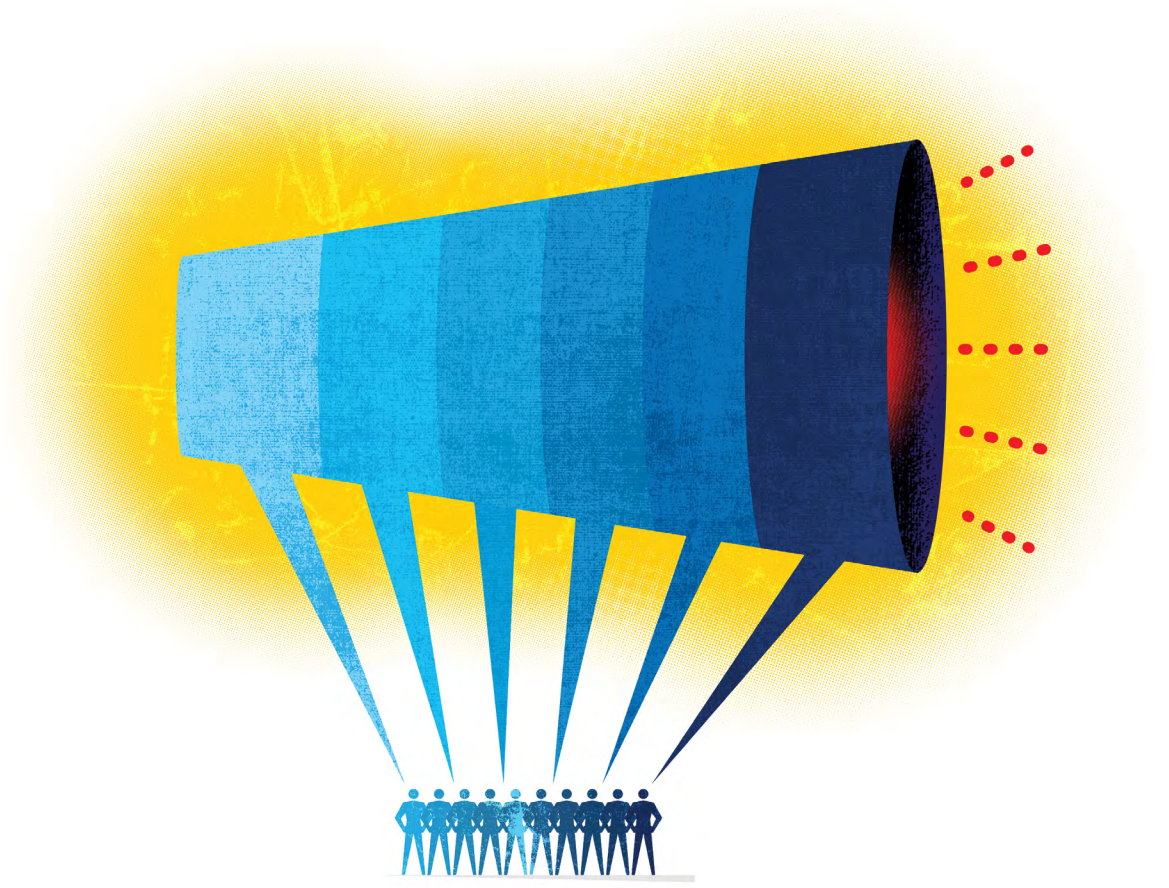

PERSPECTIVE

Beyond the Town Hall Meeting

Innovations in the Quest for Public Input

BY KATHERINE BARRETT AND RICHARD GREENE

There's no argument about the value of public input in making important government decisions. According to GFOA, good public participation practices can help governments be more accountable and responsive and can also improve the public's perception of governmental performance and the value the public receives from the government.

But despite their potential, these benefits aren't easy for many communities to achieve. Scores of people have told us that their community's approach to garnering citizen input is limited to holding regular public meetings. That's a popular approach, certainly, and one that's often required by statute, but it may fall far short of garnering the kind of information leaders can use to make hard decisions.

"We often hear from budget managers that at a budget meeting you have the same relatively small group of people who show up and you already know what their input is going to be before they provide it," says Chris Adams, CEO of Balancing Act, which has worked with over 150 cities to create online budget simulations to help get input from people. "While it's important to give residents that opportunity, it's not always useful."

Even though virtual platforms like Zoom are expanding public meetings to a larger group, they won't necessarily attract people who are representative of the community, especially those who

live in less affluent areas and have long felt disenfranchised by their governments. "Localities have to do a better job of identifying what the makeup of their community really is to reach out to them. And public meetings haven't typically delivered that kind of representation," said Daniel Bevarly, founder and principal of New Democracy Partners and an adjunct professor at Florida State University.

Fortunately, a growing number of local governments are reaching out to the public to draw opinions from a far more representative population than what's often described as "the usual gang of suspects."

Consider Roseville, California, a city with more than 140,000 residents. Roseville was confronting a $10 million structural deficit and had been borrowing from reserves to make its budget whole. After about 10 years of budget cuts, along with adjustments to compensation and service, "we had done everything we could do without the public noticing," Megan Scheid, Roseville deputy city manager, said. "We had to get public input to help us prioritize."

The solution? "We sent postcards to every one of the 60,000 households in the city," Scheid recalled. "We wanted to make sure the outreach effort allowed residents to access ways to communicate with us, whether they had a lot of time or a little time, whether they were comfortable speaking at a public meeting or not, whether they were comfortable with electronic communications or not."

Roseville offered citizens the opportunity to make their sentiments known with input from Balancing Act's budget simulator and another vehicle created by FlashVote, a company that provides easy surveying on any topic, from any communications device. The city made it clear to residents that there were consequences attached to every cut they made. If they chose to take money from parks, for example, it was made clear that choice might affect the quality of play on sports fields.

The results were startling. "We heard from the community that they wanted an opportunity to raise revenue rather than make additional cuts," Scheid said. So, the city council put a measure on the ballot for an additional half-cent in the local sales tax. "We were sweating it because the cuts available were those we didn't want to have to make." When the voters approved the measure, the city was able to preserve its existing service levels and even expand in priority areas like parks and public safety.

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Resident input can be used not just to help with broad guidance on a budget but also to help get community members to weigh in on very specific issues.

The City of Asheville, North Carolina, for example, had problems in a neighborhood that enjoyed a lush canopy of beautiful old trees—but the roots from those trees were creating dangerous problems for pedestrians because they were causing the sidewalks to buckle. "The roots were big, and it looked like plate tectonics, where the sidewalk had buckled up," Dawa Hitch, communication and public engagement director for Asheville, said. "This was a real issue for people walking with their kids and with strollers, and things needed to change so they could have a safer experience."

Still, while the pedestrians were concerned about safe walking, others in the neighborhood wanted to do anything they could to preserve the tree canopy. A bond issue would cover the remediation of the sidewalks, but how could that be done in a way that would please the most people?

A public survey was released in the summer of 2019, leading to the production of some early concept sketches showing alternatives. That was followed up with a public meeting in October 2021, and in January 2022 there was a neighborhood meeting, followed by yet another survey to clarify the community's preferences.

Three options evolved:

1. Replace the existing sidewalk on both sides with a six-foot-wide sidewalk, remove the trees, add curb extensions, and then plant trees in yards to replace the trees that would be removed.
2. Replace the existing sidewalk on only one side, removing the trees from that side only, coupled with saving the healthy trees on the other side and planting additional ones to help replace the lost canopy.
3. Create a four-foot-wide sidewalk on both sides and then add a two-foot grass strip between the curb and the new sidewalk while preserving the existing trees where possible and replacing those that would have to be removed with new ones in the grass buffer strip.

Of the 378 responses received, 89 percent chose option three. As of mid-September, the city was heading in that direction, though it was still open to further comments. The results were widely publicized so anyone who had

voiced an opinion knew that they had been heard in the decision-making process. "Public trust is such a fragile thing," Hitch said. "Not everyone is happy with every decision, but making it clear how we got to where we are is critical."

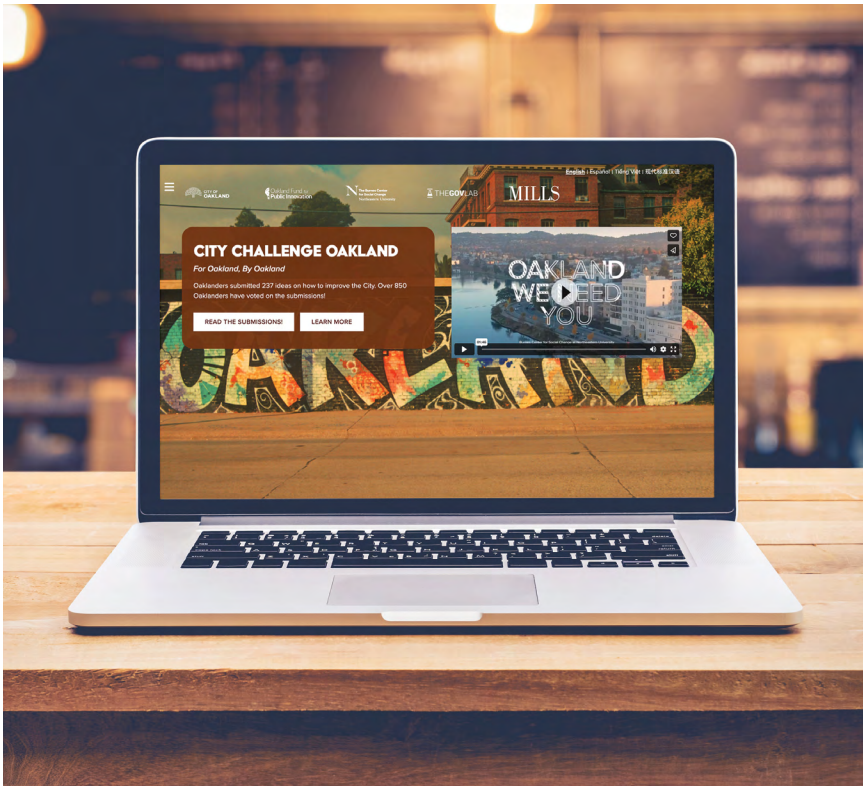
Meanwhile, the City of Oakland, California, has been experimenting with the best way to use its residents' expertise for the benefit of the city with its innovative "City Challenge Oakland" initiative. This effort—a collaboration between the Oakland Fund for Public Innovation, Mills College at Northeastern University, the Burns Center for Social Change (including its Governance Lab) at Northeastern, and the city government of Oakland—is an attempt to determine several areas in which the expertise of residents could bring real value: homelessness, violent crime, and illegal vehicles/illegal dumping.

The city challenge team designed the process to help residents make suggestions in a way that would allow as many Oaklanders as possible to participate. Questions were posed in plain language with versions in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Chinese. In addition, the City Challenge website was designed to ensure easy accessibility by mobile devices.

"We just asked questions like, 'What's your idea and how would it solve the problem? How do you think you'd go about it? Who do you need help from to make it happen?'" Henri Hammond-Paul, a fellow with the Governance Lab, said.

The effort is too new to see the concrete outcomes of the solutions offered, but in terms of participation it was a roaring success—850 Oaklander residents voted on the 237 ideas that were submitted to refine the list to a manageable number.

A couple of months ago, the city announced the six suggestions it plans to pilot and potentially scale—in partnership with the individuals who first proposed the idea, where that's feasible.



City Challenge Oakland engages residents to suggest ways to improve homelessness, violent crime and illegal vehicles/illegal dumping.

One of the winners was based on this suggestion: "A recent analysis of a crime prevention program from Liberia found that providing therapy and cash assistance to young men at high risk of violent crime dramatically decreased the chance that they would commit violent crimes, even 10 years later. We could replicate this program here in Oakland, working through the Department of Violence Prevention, which is already connected to these young men."

Beth Simone Noveck is a professor at Northeastern University, where she directs the Burnes Center for Social Change. She's one of the nation's leading authorities on getting input from residents and has worked with us to assemble a list of eight proven practices for this important exercise. They are as follows:

1. Start by figuring out exactly what you want to know, who wants to know it, and how you plan to use the information.
2. Determine the formats that are easiest for you and for those who are participating.
3. Pick a platform that enables the process you need. You don't necessarily need complicated or expensive tools with lots of bells and whistles.
4. Residents don't just have opinions; they have expertise that you can tap.
5. Be clear about precisely what you're looking for—for example, proposals that can be implemented in a year.
6. It's important to tell the people how their input will be used. People participate when they feel their participation matters.
7. It's not enough to create an opportunity to engage. You must advertise the opportunity, especially to those who are least likely to participate.
8. Resident engagement about ways to solve a problem can also include professional engagement such as with experts at universities or your own workplace.

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