RETHINKING BUDGETING

RETHINKING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Why we need to rethink public engagement and design principles for better engagement

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ABOUT GFOA

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) represents over 21,000 public finance officers throughout the United States and Canada. GFOA's mission is to advance excellence in government finance. GFOA views its role as a resource, educator, facilitator, and advocate for both its members and the governments they serve and provides best practice guidance, leadership, professional development, resources and tools, networking opportunities, award programs, and advisory services.

ABOUT RETHINKING BUDGETING

Local governments have long relied on incremental, line item budgeting where last year's budget becomes next year's budget with changes around the margin. Though this form of budgeting has its advantages and can be useful under circumstances of stability, it also has important disadvantages. The primary disadvantage is that it causes local governments to be slow to adapt to changing conditions. The premise of the "Rethinking Budgeting" initiative is that the public finance profession has an opportunity to update local government budgeting practices to take advantage of new ways of thinking, new technologies, and to better meet the changing needs of communities. The Rethinking Budgeting initiative will raise new and interesting ideas like those featured in this paper and will produce guidance for state and local policy makers on how to local government budget systems can be adapted to today's needs. We hope the ideas presented in this paper will spur conversation about the possibilities for rethinking budgeting. The Rethinking Budgeting initiative is a collaborative effort between the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) and International City/County Management Association (ICMA).

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The budget is the most important policy document that a local government produces.* As such, it has been recognized for decades that local governments should do better at engaging citizens in the budget process. The standard avenue for citizen engagement in the budget process is often limited to a public hearing or two, which typically happens after important decisions have been made and often amount to little more than a chance for citizens to air their grievances at a microphone.

In this paper, we will contend that new forces have emerged that suggest local governments need to consider public engagement in a new light. Before we examine these forces and their implications, we must recognize that public engagement is the most difficult part of planning and budgeting. To take on a difficult problem, we first should define the problem before attempting to solve it. In that spirit, in this paper we will first re-examine the reasons for public engagement. Knowing *why* we do public engagement sets us up to understand *how* to do public engagement.

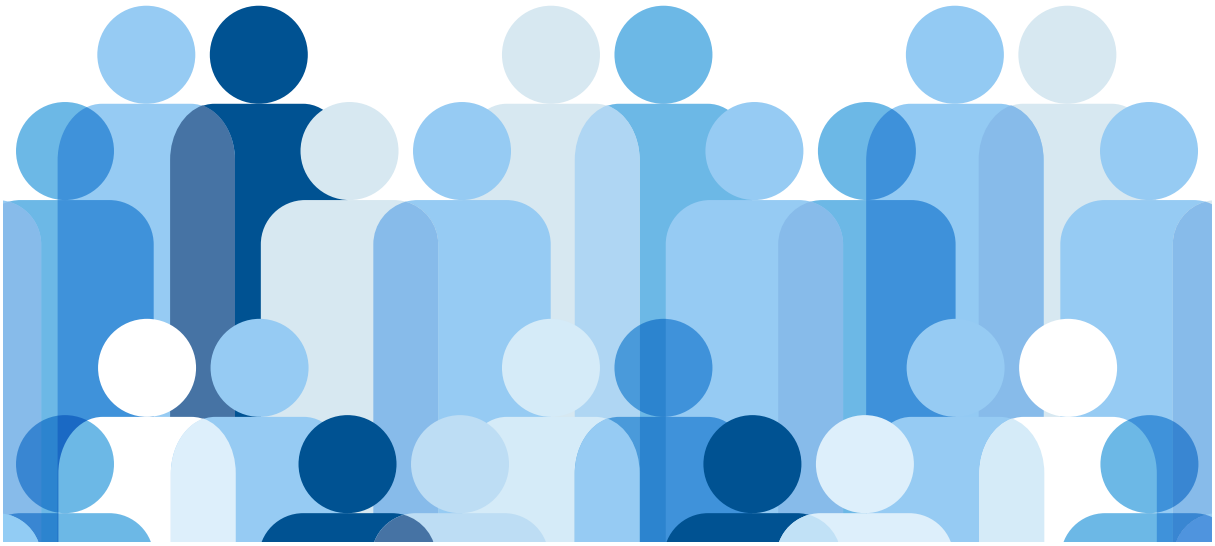
In this paper, we will also "think like a chef and not a cook." A cook follows a prescribed recipe but runs into problems when the recipe does not fit the situation. A chef, however, has deeper understanding and knowledge and can adapt to the situation. For that reason, the second part of this paper will set forth principles to help local governments design public engagement in a way that satisfies the purposes of public engagement.

ABOUT THE WORD "CITIZEN"

By "citizen," we mean people who share a civic identity. This is the "self" in self-government. It also means participation in the creation and receipt of public goods. This is the "government" in self-government. You can read more about the meaning of "citizen" and its significance in the resources at the bottom of this page.†

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT DEFINED[1]

The activities by which people's concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues. It usually includes a combination of providing access to relevant information, gathering input, discussing and connecting, identifying and providing choices, and deliberation on major decisions.



* Because the budget outlines resources for a community's policy priorities.

† Please consult kettering.org/blogs/work-citizen or, for more detail, the book *Ecology of Democracy* by Dr. David Matthews, available at kettering.org.

Rethinking the Purpose of Public Engagement

A good place to start rethinking public engagement is to consider why public engagement is important. If we know the reasons local governments need public input, we can design public engagement accordingly. Traditional reasons for public engagement in planning and budgeting include building trust in the decision-making process, defining community priorities, improving the quality of outcomes, improving relationships between the public and public officials, and building stronger support for the resulting decisions. While these reasons are still valid, we contend they are incomplete. In following pages, we examine four reasons public engagement is important today, distinct from decades past, and the conditions that give rise to the reasons.[2]

(Re)Establish legitimacy of local government as an institution. In most decades after World War II, the legitimacy of government was taken for granted. Today, the legitimacy of government is in question,* but legitimacy is needed for government to function. Many people today, especially the young, feel they need to disrupt institutions to be heard.

In this paper we will first re-examine the reasons for public engagement. Knowing *why* we do public engagement sets us up to understand *how* to do public engagement.

An important contributor to this loss of legitimacy is a loss of public trust in governing institutions. Many people do not believe public officials will act on behalf of the entire community and that the voices of low income, black, indigenous, and people of color will continue to be unheard and marginalized. For an increasing number of families, the American dream seems unattainable, with income disparities the highest in our recent history.[3] People look to government for solutions that are not forthcoming. People also look to government to be a partner with them in recognizing and addressing shared community problems, and to be seen as a co-producer of public goods with government rather than a passive bystander, customer, or client. Since 2020, we have seen numerous public protests demanding more responsive government on topics as diverse as racial justice, COVID restrictions, reproductive rights, and school curriculums. These protests have become a movement and demand an affirmative response from local government—one that puts citizens at the center of public problem-solving—if our democracy is to work as it should.

The loss of public trust is accompanied by increased divisiveness or polarization, making it difficult for people to bridge the divides that separate them. Yet when provided the opportunity to name the issues they are concerned about, frame the context of the issue, deliberate, and act together to address the issues, most people are willing to work through tensions and trade-offs to find common ground and solutions they can live with. Engaging citizens, in democratic and complementary ways, helps them build relationships of trust with other citizens and public officials; gain confidence in our governing institutions through shared work and responsibility; and become owners of the solutions or co-producers of public goods with government.

Another contributor to government's loss of legitimacy is the "information tsunami" in which society now finds itself: an exponentially increasing and extreme volume of available information.[4] Before, citizens had limited information about government, and that information was intermediated by government itself or perhaps one or two media outlets (e.g., the local paper). Today, citizens

*According to Pew Research Center, from 1964 to 2017, American's trust in government dropped from 77% to 18%. Around that time, American's belief that the federal government serves their interest went from 64% to 21%. Though these statistics are focused on the federal government, we should acknowledge that: A) local government typically fares better than the federal (and state) government in these polls, but also B) their respective scores are often correlated, which means declining federal scores do not bode well for local government.

As citizens have access to more sources of information, the authoritativeness of any sole source goes down and citizens can cherry-pick sources that feed them their preferred narratives.

have more information sources, like Facebook, NextDoor, and Twitter. To make matters worse, the incentives faced by these platforms encourage sensationalism, provoking outrage, and presenting users with information that confirms their preexisting beliefs.[5] This is especially true of social media, which is the most important source of information for many people.[6]

As citizens have access to more sources of information,[7] the authoritativeness of any sole source goes down and citizens can cherry-pick sources that feed them their preferred narratives. This creates a negative feedback loop. Sources that provide simple narratives catering to current biases get more attention, thus incentivizing them to do more. Sources that try to provide quality information are at a disadvantage because they can't compete as well for the public's attention. Thus, citizens become less certain that they can believe what government officials (or experts in general) say and government's legitimacy comes into question.

This is not the only way the information tsunami brings legitimacy into question. The missteps of local government are laid bare as never before. Some missteps may be exaggerated (or fabricated) and others are real, but either way it creates a gap between the perceived performance of government and government's claims of competence. The problem is not that the people who make up the institutions of local government are corrupt or incompetent, but the issues local government must deal with often are complex, and institutions' ability to deal with them are finite. This leads to our next purpose for public engagement:

Align public expectations with what government can realistically accomplish. It has become a truism among public managers that the public expects more from the government than they are willing to pay for. Though there is scant research on the public's expectations versus reality. Survey results from **Polco** suggest that public managers' observations may be accurate. A majority (around 75%) of residents across American cities report that the quality of services from their local government is "good" or "excellent." Yet the same respondents also rate the value of services for the taxes paid to the local government poorly—a "49" on a 0 to 100 scale, where 100 is "excellent" and 0 is "poor."* This may imply that although day-to-day services are satisfactory, citizens are looking for more from their government than they are getting.[8]

* Polco's 100-point scale is designed to mimic a traditional letter-grading scale were 90 to 100 would be very good, 80 to 89 good, etc.

Part of the problem is that the rhetoric of democratic politics has become misaligned with what local governments can achieve. Failure occurs when the public's expectations and government's claims of what it can accomplish diverge from reality. Elections often incentivize attacks on current office holders (blaming them for problems) or big promises of how new candidates will solve problems (which rarely come to pass)—both of which tend to undermine faith in government. This divergence between public expectations of government and government's capabilities is a potential problem for all local governments, even if it is a matter of the public expecting flawless street conditions in exchange for minimal taxes.

Many times, the issue the public is concerned about is more complex than street conditions. In the Polco survey, respondents were most critical of housing and economic opportunities. Complex problems like this do not have tidy technical solutions and are impossible to solve to everyone's satisfaction.[9] Compromises, trade-offs, and continuous management of the issue are the only resolution. For example, a shortage of affordable housing requires greater density of housing to address. However, the success of NIMBYism* shows that there is no shortage of people who prefer lower density, at least in their neighborhood. Thus, if government is expected to "solve" issues like affordable housing, then government will be put in a position of almost certain failure. The result of failure is to further sap local government's legitimacy.

As an illustration of expectations versus reality in local government planning and budgeting, let's consider the "equity" movement in budgeting. GFOA has written extensively about the **importance of considering equity in budgeting** as one of the elements of fairness in budgeting.[10] However, the rhetoric around equity in budgeting sometimes goes beyond what government can do. For example, the stated aims of budgeting in equity sometimes imply that equal outcomes for members of the public should be a goal.** One can question whether local government has the ability (or the writ) to achieve this goal, especially when a citizen's own agency has an important impact on the extent to which they achieve the outcome in question, and where government intervention may be seen as overreach into private affairs.

Get Feedback From a Fractured Public. In the heyday of the traditional budget, the 1960s, society was far more conformist than it is today. Society has been becoming steadily more individualistic since then.[11] Add to that the information tsunami that encourages further and faster fragmenting of the public into groups that cohere (usually temporarily) around some issue of shared interest.

This means there is no single "public" that government can get feedback from. The "public" that engages in local issues (the people who attend city council meetings, participate online, and email council members and staff) is comprised of self-selected individuals who have an interest in that issue. These people are not representative of most citizens. Many citizens may not feel they have a stake in the issue at hand or may be content with the status quo. Others may not have access to the decision-making process. Government cannot make decisions based on the voices of those who show up and who are not representative of the interests of the larger community. So, what is the purpose of public engagement?

First is to hear from people with a stake in the issue at hand. These people may be represented by an interest group. However, in other cases, they may not. Low-income people or members of marginalized communities may not have the resources to organize, the time to attend public meetings, or feel welcome. Hearing from people with a stake helps government understand those with the most to lose

* NIMBY stands for "Not in My Backyard."

** For example, in a 2020 campaign video, Kamala Harris said, "equitable treatment means we all end up in the same place" along with a cartoon illustrating her point. Though she was not referring to local government budgeting, it is a well-publicized example of a view of equity that sometimes shows up in local government budgeting. We can also observe the popular equity cartoon that shows people looking over the fence at a baseball game, where equity is defined as everyone seeing over the fence (the desired outcome). You can see more research about how people of differing political beliefs tend to define fairness and equity at **gfoa.org/fairness**.

(or gain) from the outcome of a decision. Minimizing losses and figuring out how to make as many people as possible better off is essential to maximizing the total benefit for the community. This may help defuse potential conflict among those for whom the stakes are highest.[12] In many cases, the people with the most to lose are historically marginalized populations. This is because these groups, by definition, do not have resources at their disposal or access to the policymaking process. Even a loss that is not so large in most people's estimation could hurt a marginalized group because it is *relatively large* compared to the resources they have.

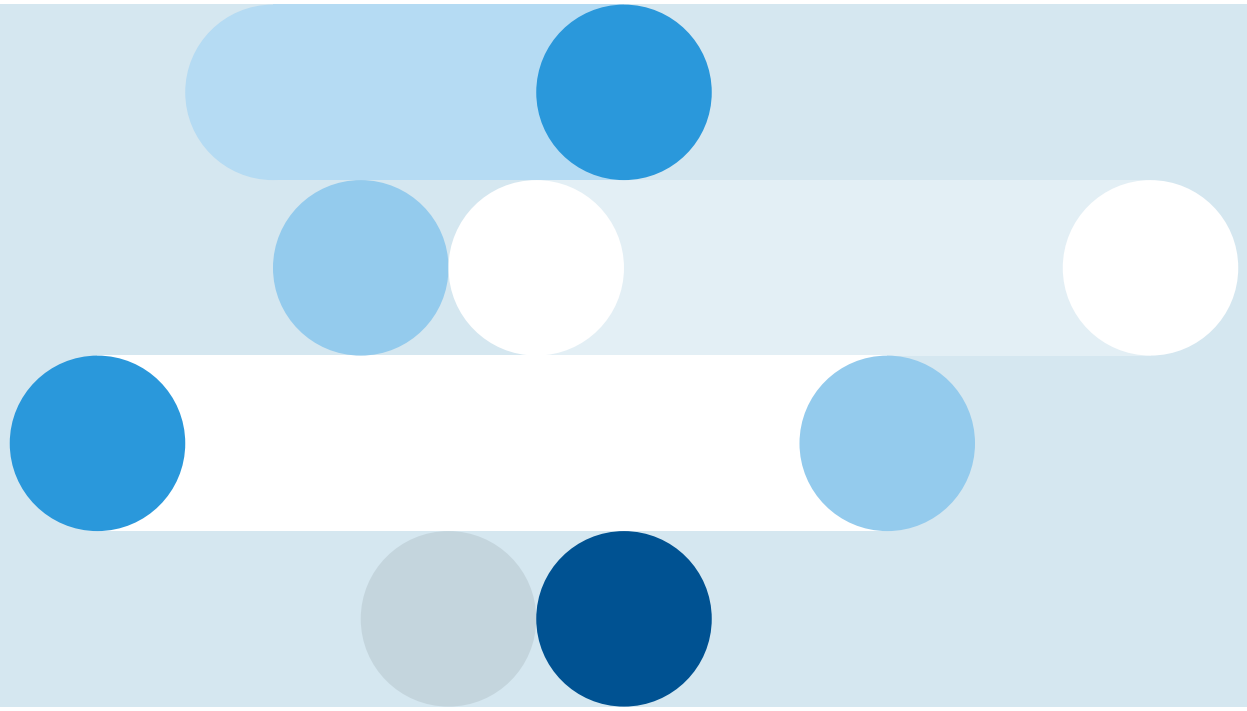
A second purpose is to bolster government's legitimacy in the eyes of the public that is most impacted by the issue. Legitimacy is the government's ability to justify its decisions with diverse stakeholders. Legitimacy is important to engage the public in co-creating solutions that government authority can help enact. Conventional public engagement, like the public hearing, often delegitimizes government because people do not feel heard, do not understand how decisions are made, and get the impression that government officials are not interested in public opinion. We will see later in this paper that public engagement can be used to find common ground and heal some of the fracturing the public has experienced.

Hearing from people with a stake helps government understand those with the most to lose (or gain) from the outcome of a decision.

Finally, public engagement cuts across different perspectives on democracy. Public engagement may support "direct democracy," or giving the public the power to make decisions. In this case, the representativeness of the participants would be critical. However, public engagement is often one part of a broader planning/budgeting process that helps inform the decision-making of elected officials. This supports a "representative" form of democracy. Some elected officials see themselves as delegates (voting in a way that represents their constituents' preferences) and others more as trustees (voting what they think is best). Public engagement can inform both types of electeds by providing a clearer sense of constituents' preferences (while helping refine those preferences) or by helping the elected think through the issue and make wiser decisions. Even in a process that supports representative democracy, it would be ideal if the participants are a cross-section of the entire community. In any event, high-quality public engagement will provide better information than the common alternatives, like traditional public hearings, closed-door meetings with interest groups, social media trends, etc.

Provide an alternative to the politics of cynicism. A public fractured into temporary and shifting interest groups cannot provide sustained, coherent solutions to the issues that people are concerned about, especially when issues are complex, where no perfect or permanent solution is possible. On top of this is the questioned legitimacy of government—the institution that might have the authority to provide or at least coordinate a solution. So if the public can't provide a solution, and the delegitimized government can't either, then opposition to the status quo provides a message that a group can cohere around. This "politics of cynicism" lacks unifying ideas, programs, or plans for a solution. In fact, when one is proposed from within the opposition group, the group tends to lose cohesion because the members of the group must confront the complexities required to solve the problem that originally brought the group together.

High-quality public engagement must provide an alternative to the politics of cynicism, channeling citizen interest into constructive dialogue and a search for solutions.



The Search for Solutions

An organizing premise of the **Rethinking Budgeting** initiative is that budget officers need to be "chefs, not cooks." This means that the budget officer, like a chef, needs to understand the available raw ingredients and how to combine and prepare them to suit the intended audience. A cook, by contrast, only follows a recipe that was provided by someone else. This is the difference between real knowledge and know-how.

When it comes to public engagement, there is no set recipe that local governments can follow. This is because the needs for public engagement are context specific. To give an example, public engagement could be used either to: A) get input from the public, which would be one factor used by the elected board to make a decision; or B) have the public make the decision. Neither of these options are inherently better. Which to use will depend on factors like the nature of the issue at hand and how much local officials are willing/able to defer to public opinion. There are other contextual issues like this that the designer of public engagement will need to think through.

In that spirit, this section will offer broader design principles for public engagement (the raw ingredients) along with examples of how those design principles might be put into practice. Taken together, these principles will allow local governments to fulfill the purposes of public engagement we discussed earlier. As a good chef knows, you might sometimes leave out ingredients to make a better dish. Hence, the design principles should be used selectively—applied where they fit and left aside where they do not. We have summarized the design principles here, and we will discuss them in detail afterward. After each detailed discussion we present a short list of "questions and conversation starters" to help you think about how the principle might apply to your public engagement design.

* Quoted from Farnam Street blog article: "First Principles: The Building Blocks of True Knowledge." **https://fs.blog/first-principles**

The Design Principles for Rethinking Public Engagement

PRINCIPLE 1: Quality Over Quantity: More Public Engagement Is Not Always Better. Pick your spots with public engagement to make the best use of your resources and give citizens the best experience.

PRINCIPLE 2: Build or Bolster the Institutions to Support Public Engagement. High-quality democratic decisions depend on high-quality democratic institutions.

PRINCIPLE 3: Think of Public Engagement as the Improved Capacity for Sense-Making. Public engagement turns raw data and opinion into quality information and questions, then, through engagement and discussion, into usable knowledge and mutual understanding, which can lead to wisdom, high-quality decisions, and collaborative action.

PRINCIPLE 4: Help the Public Engage With Complexity. Many of the issues that most inspire the passion of citizens are complex problems. Complex problems pose distinct challenges to democratic discourse, but high-quality public engagement can help.

PRINCIPLE 5: Push Back Against the Politics of Cynicism With the Politics of Co-Creation. Public engagement can be designed to promote mutual understanding and jointly working toward solutions.

PRINCIPLE 6: Revitalize the "Responsibilities" That Go Along With "Rights." Shift the question being asked of citizens from "What do you want?" to "What would you do?" and, ultimately, "What should we do?" (the government and public together). This takes the citizen out of the role of an individualistic consumer of public services to being part of a team effort to address community problems.

PRINCIPLE 7: Develop Robust Strategies for Dealing With Bad Actors. Design the engagement to minimize the potential for bad actors, like using deliberative engagement methods, small group discussions, and trained facilitators.

PRINCIPLE 8: Understand the Role of the "Expert" and Play It With Care. The public is less likely than in the past to defer to the expertise of a local government's professional staff. Public engagement must be designed accordingly.

PRINCIPLE 9: Balance Expert Judgment and Public Engagement to Find the Solutions. Public engagement is different from direct democracy. Quality public engagement weaves together inputs from experts and the public to help public officials reach wise decisions.

PRINCIPLE 10: Make Public Engagement Work for Elected Officials. Elected officials have a lot to gain from high-quality public engagement but also face a lot of risk from public engagement gone wrong. Design public engagement so that it works well for elected officials.

See page 32 for an infographic which visualizes the four reasons to rethink public engagement and the ten principles listed above.

Before we dive into the details of the design principles, let's strike a note of optimism. To begin this paper, we described a series of pressures on local government that gave rise to new reasons for public engagement. Recent research has also highlighted reasons to be optimistic about public engagement in local governments.[13] For example, people are inherently social creatures who seek purpose and community. This means that, with a good process, people can come together to address difficult problems. Further, people are inherently creative, pragmatic, and collaborative problem-solvers. The design principles we will discuss can help bring out and accentuate these strengths. At the end of each design principle, we have posed "Questions and Conversation Starters" to help you think about how you might put the principle into practice.

PRINCIPLE 1

Quality Over Quantity: More Public Engagement is Not Always Better

Though there are cases where the public is not engaged in budgeting often enough, this principle cautions us against swinging the pendulum to the other extreme of over-engagement. There are reasons to be just as cautious about over-engagement as under-engagement. For one, low-quality public engagement can do more harm than good. In fact, one study suggested that attending a typical public meeting was associated with a lower sense of efficacy and belonging to the community![14] High-quality public engagement will cost time and money, so if a high volume of public engagement will come at the expense of quality, then it might be better to have low volume but higher quality.[15] Also, the public is already overwhelmed with information, so the goal should not be to add to the information tsunami but rather to cut through it. That will require a sharp design, which our other principles will speak to.

High-quality public engagement will cost time and money, so if a high volume of public engagement will come at the expense of quality, then it might be better to have low volume but higher quality.

But before designing public engagement, a local government needs to find the issues where public engagement has the best chance to be effective. Here are some features of issues that may be ripe for productive public engagement:

- There is time and space in the decision-making process for the public's input to influence the government's direction. If the issue has already been "decided," engagement will be less effective and may frustrate participants. For example, the traditional budget hearing takes place at the end of the budget process after most (if not all) important decisions have been made. Public engagement could happen before the budget process, to learn what issues the public feels are most important. The budget can then direct resources to address those issues.
- Issues are primarily defined by tensions between positive values, such as freedom, safety, and equality. People on all sides of the issue want the best for the community even if their definitions of what is "best" are different.
- All major stakeholders realize that the status quo of the issue under discussion is not sustainable. This could be, for example, the budget itself, where there are big and persistent deficits, or there could be some community concern (public health, safety, etc.).
- The commitment and action of multiple groups is necessary to make progress on the issue.
- There is a "middle ground" on the issue, and people could be brought over to it. In contrast, highly polarized issues that have devolved in stark win-lose terms will have less potential.
- Different stakeholders may misunderstand how others perceive the issue but are open to having a good-faith conversation with people on the "other side."
- Resources exist to support the decisions that come out of public engagement.

These criteria have critical implications for engaging the public in planning and budgeting.

First, picking the right issue is the **indispensable** starting point for productive public engagement.

Second, the "right issue" may not be the entire budget! Local governments have limited resources for public engagement, so rather than trying to engage the public on the entire budget, it may be better to pick a specific topic that is of interest to the community. For example, one of the authors of this paper was an assistant city manager for a small town, where trees were an important part of community's character. Hence, the public was engaged in a conversation about how to assess the stock of trees in the community. This led to funding in the next budget for a special project to inventory the trees in the community and their health. The budget in the year after that created funding for ongoing assistance from an arborist to maintain trees in public rights of way. Of course, local governments can engage the public in conversation about the wider budget, but it is not required for productive public engagement.

Third is to know the goal of engaging the public. The goal can range from informing the public of a decision that has already been made to empowering the public to make the decision themselves.[16] Most public engagement in public finance will be in the middle of these two, where the public's involvement is used to help make the decision but is not the final word.* Knowing the goal is important for a couple of reasons. It sets expectations for all stakeholders, including elected officials, staff, and citizens. It also informs the design of the engagement. For instance, if the goal is to inform, then the design should avoid giving participants the impression that they are decision-makers. If the goal is to engage citizens in the decision-making, the design must allow them to participate effectively but also make clear to citizens what role their participation plays in getting to the final decision. Many design principles in this paper speak to how to engage citizens in decision-making.

The fourth implication is if the issues at hand are not a good fit with engagement, or if you do not have the institutional capacity for public engagement, you might be better off *not* doing public engagement. You need the institutional capacity to see successful public engagement through. We will turn our attention to that next.

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

- What issues could most benefit from public engagement in your community?
- How do you know that these issues are the ones that could most benefit? Has the public given you clues on what those issues might be?
- How broad should the topic of public engagement be? Should you focus on a narrow issue of particular interest to the community, or do you want to engage the public in a larger discussion about the budget?
- Should you do public engagement at all? If the issue is not a good fit for public engagement or you do not have the time/resources to do it well, you may be better off not doing it.

* There could be examples at the end of the spectrum as well. The "Participatory Budgeting Project" is an example of an engagement strategy where the public is expected to make the final decision.

PRINCIPLE 2

Build or Bolster the Institutions to Support Public Engagement

High-quality democratic decisions depend on high-quality democratic institutions. Further, lasting democratic legitimacy does not come from charismatic leaders; it comes from institutions. Thus, local government must invest in institutions that can support high-quality public engagement, which requires more resources but is likely to arrive at better, more widely supported decisions. This will be more efficient overall, considering that quick but poor decisions can be costly over time.

That said, building the institutional capacity for better public engagement in the budget office may be difficult for many local governments. Public engagement requires specialized skills that might not match the skills and interests of existing staff, and the resources may not exist to create a permanent, new capacity in the budget office.

Local government must invest in institutions that can support high-quality public engagement, which requires more resources but is likely to arrive at better, more widely supported decisions.

So how might this capacity be created? The budget office could work more closely with other elements within local government that do have capacity for public engagement. Some public information or communication departments are growing beyond the traditional public relations role to support high-quality public engagement. For example, in the City of Mississauga and the City of Burlington, both in Ontario, the public information office plays a lead role in public engagement around the budget. Other municipalities, such as Larimer County and the City of Longmont in northern Colorado, have developed internal facilitation teams. Employees across multiple departments dedicate time outside their normal duties to build their skills through dedicated trainings. When a department needs help, they can call on that internal group for assistance.

An institution does not have to rely on its employees. Examples of outside resources include universities, community foundations, philanthropic groups, other local governments, and civic organizations. For example, a contract with a local consultant or university could provide as-needed support for public engagement. Relying on outside consultants can be costly, but the cost of no engagement or low-quality engagement can be even more significant overall. An alternative could be using citizen leadership academies, which have traditionally prepared citizens to work on boards and committees. Those academies could train citizens to volunteer as facilitators.

Let's move to the next principle, which starts to answer a natural next question: What can local government do with this institutional capacity for high-quality public engagement?

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

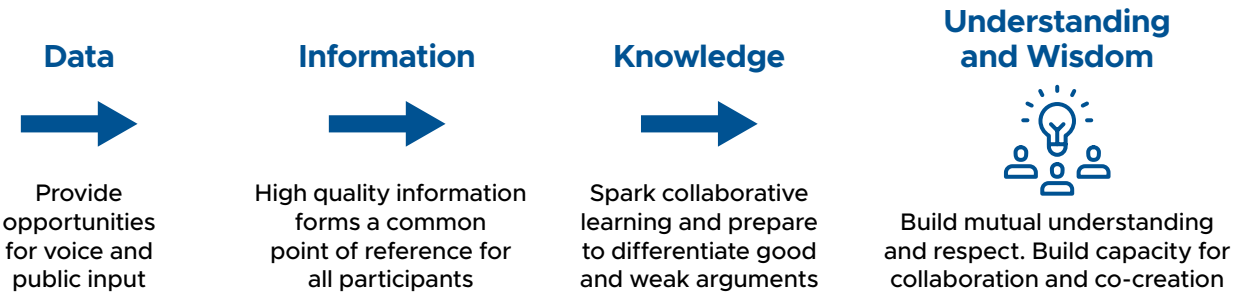
- How will you institutionalize the capacity for high-quality public engagement? Will it be found inside your organization, or will you partner with an outside provider? If it will be inside your organization, will it be in the budget department or in another department, like public information, or decentralized among many departments? Will public engagement be sponsored by a ranking elected official or by an appointed official?

PRINCIPLE 3

Think of Public Engagement as the Improved Capacity for Sense-Making

The "information tsunami" we described earlier challenges our ability to make sense of the world around us. Public engagement supports government in transforming the noise that occurs about local issues into a more useful form. Conventional engagement—such as surveys that lack rigor,[17] one-at-a-time-at-the-microphone, emails to elected officials, and social media posts—serve to collect individual opinions and preferences. But such data is limited in terms of perspective, questionable in terms of accuracy, and lacking in terms of recognizing inherent tensions and trade-offs. Too often, people are talking past each other, focusing on different aspects of the issue or different underlying values. As a result, simple "magic bullet" solutions or blame game dominates, and processes are unable to tap into the best of human nature: our creativity in addressing complex challenges. Quality engagement must first process and filter raw public data into quality information that allows the public to engage with it productively and deliberatively. Formats like "**issue guides**" walk the reader through the nuances of an issue and the choices the community is faced with (without leading them to a conclusion). The goal is to avoid the shortcuts and spark our best thinking. This art of framing for deliberation, rather than framing for persuasion,[18] is a skill local governments must develop capacity to support quality public engagement. Think of the institution of public engagement as a "weather station" that provides feedback on the prevailing winds of public opinion, as opposed to the thumb-in-air of relying on public hearings, social media, etc. In the end, communities need processes that can turn raw data and opinion into quality information and questions, then, through authentic engagement and discussion, into usable knowledge and mutual understanding, which can lead to wisdom, high-quality decisions, and collaborative action. This is the essence of public engagement as sense-making, as shown in Exhibit 1.

EXHIBIT 1 | **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AS SENSE-MAKING**



Sense-making is not only good for government. Public engagement as sense-making helps the public make sense of what local government does and can do. It can help the public better understand local government's capabilities and limits. It can help create a shared sense of reality between the public and public officials. This happens by bringing them into the decision-making process and face-to-face with the complexities and hard trade-offs at hand.

So, what are the methods governments can use for sense-making? Many conventional engagement processes—such as surveys, citizen comment, and open houses—are focused on gathering opinion and "input." That raw data is necessary, but it's only the beginning. "Deliberative engagement" methods are critical for moving raw data down the line toward wisdom.[19] Such processes focus on interaction and rely on key components, such as high-quality background information, that help participants engage issues with more nuance, small group discussion, clear ground rules for conversation, diverse participants, capable facilitators and, perhaps, trusted third parties* who can help bridge trust between citizens and government.

As research on social psychology demonstrates, humans are not wired to interact with opposing views on difficult issues, so building capacity in these components is critical to transform our polarization-ready brains, at least temporarily, into ones willing to deliberate.[20] The information coming out of deliberative forums is different than that coming out of a survey or one-at-a-time-at-the-microphone. It is data that shows how people engage each other, how they work through tough issues, and which trade-offs they are willing or unwilling to accept. Most important, quality deliberative processes can often spark human creativity since participants cannot rely on simple solutions or the blame game and thus often develop new ways to address their shared problems.

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This is not to imply that local government should be a windsock and go with whatever the prevailing winds are or to imply that citizens should accept local government as is and give up hope that it can address difficult problems. High-quality public engagement also works to refine public opinion by helping citizens understand the complexities at work and how those might be addressed. The deliberative process works to bring together public opinion with expert knowledge, tapping into the best of each while working to avoid either of them dominating too much. We take this up more in our next section.

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

- What issues in your community might be in most need of higher quality sense-making?
- In the progression from data to information to knowledge to wisdom, where might you need the most work?

* Who this trusted third party is will depend on the community but could be a minister/clergy member, school principal, etc.

PRINCIPLE 4

Help the Public Engage With Complexity

Many of the community challenges that inspire the passion of citizens are complex problems. Complex problems are distinct from problems that are merely complicated. A jet engine is complicated. It is not easy to understand a jet engine; but once you do understand it, you can make changes and get predictable results, like fixing a broken engine. A system like the economy is complex. There are many moving parts, with unpredictable results arising from the interactions of those parts. You cannot "fix" complex problems. Rather, when it comes to the complex problems local government and the public engage with, it is best to recognize the possible trade-offs, the competing values underlying those trade-offs, and then negotiate the resulting tensions.[21] Examples of complex problems local governments contend with include public safety, drug use, education, public health, and more.

Complex problems pose a challenge to public engagement. Because they defy easy answers, they contribute to the politics of cynicism. In the absence of a clear solution, those interested in the problem cohere around being against the status quo and look for people to blame for the status quo (often public officials). This can lead public officials to perceive the public as unreasonable and, hence, impossible to productively engage with. Though the public is not inherently unreasonable, they can adopt unreasonable views in the context of a complex problem.

There is a lot that local government can do to help the public engage with complexity, recognize the nuances of problems, and get past us (the public) versus them (public officials). One strategy is to engage the public in defining the problem. People often want to jump to solutions, but that often results in solutions that treat symptoms and ignore root causes. The GFOA paper "**Defining the Problem: The Missing Piece to Local Government Planning**" describes a method called "Turn the Curve planning" that can be used to engage stakeholders in defining the problem.[22]

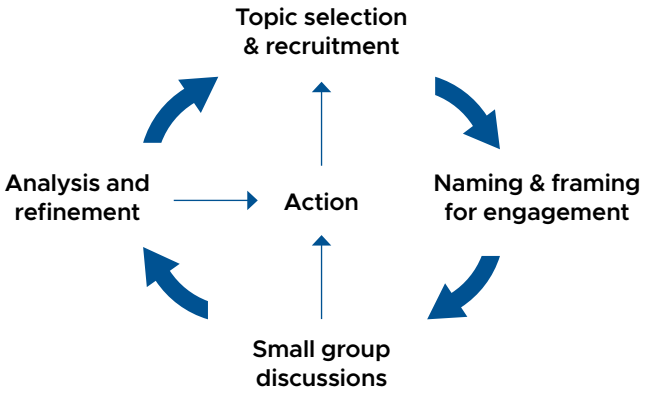
Another technique, with broader application than Turn the Curve planning, is "deliberative community forums." These forums discover what people think about an issue after they have engaged with multiple, alternative viewpoints. The forums provide the resources citizens need to develop an opinion informed by relevant facts, expert information, and an understanding of how issues and policies affect others in their community.[23] The steps of a deliberative community forum include:

1. **Choose the issue the forum will address and recruit a diverse group of participants.** Participants should include people who are impacted by the issue and changes that may occur in the community as a result of addressing the issue as well as those who may be part of the changes. Efforts should be made to engage those who may not normally engage or be included, which can require added resources or special planning. Engaging a group of people with diverse perspectives helps make sense of the issue by describing it fully and putting it in context.[24] Strategies to help engage a diverse group include holding the public engagement event near to where people live and in a space they are comfortable with, and providing childcare services, travel assistance, or translation services when necessary.
2. **Efforts should focus on gathering a clear sense of the issue from the public and content experts, often resulting in a discussion guide or backgrounder that can be used for others to engage with and refine.** The diverse views and perspectives held by the public can be gathered from conventional sources such as surveys, citizen comments, and communications to elected officials or staff. Those perspectives are filtered and combined with subject matter expertise to create substantive materials for the public to engage with around the issue that is the subject of the forum. These materials could include a background set of facts but should not be limited to that. The materials need to frame

values and trade-offs in play and lay out key questions for participants to engage. These discussion guides or backgrounders provide a baseline of information. They also lay out the tough choices and trade-offs inherent to the issue. They make it clear that there is no magic bullet to solve the issue, setting the public up well for the robust conversation that is warranted. These materials are designed to help overcome the human tendency toward simple solutions and the avoidance of tensions.

3. **Participants engage in small group discussions facilitated by trained moderators and guided by the material produced in step 2.** Small groups work together to not only identify what actions they prefer or would reject (and what trade-offs they are willing or unwilling to accept) but also to improve the background document. The background document becomes a shared project that is improved through each engagement. Participants highlight what they liked, what they want to push back on, and what is missing. Organizers work to refine the document between events.
4. **Insights gathered from the public discussions can be filtered back through subject matter experts in a variety of ways to check for misinformation and explore new possibilities.** One way is to have experts on hand and have them engage participants' questions during the event. This could include government staff but could also involve outside experts. Another way is to engage experts afterward to respond to what was learned from the public process. Over time, a cycle of engaging experts and the public, either together or later, continues. That interaction is used to improve the background document and sharpen the decision-making at the public or council level.[25] It is critical that expert views do not dominate the event. This includes explicitly (experts talking too much) but also includes implicitly (creating a presence that might inhibit conversation). For example, too many staff members who are set apart from the participants by uniforms or other markings of their expert status, or seating experts on a raised platform can impede conversation.
5. **Deliberative processes are designed to lead to action, but such action may take many forms.** The actions coming out of a deliberative process may involve official decisions by a decision-making body, but they also may require actions by individuals or groups in the community. New organizations may form, or existing organizations may adapt how they approach the issue. Ideally, collaborations form across public, private, and nonprofit sectors to address the issue. Such actions, however, should not be the conclusion of a deliberative process. Actions may change the dynamics of an issue, hopefully improving how tensions are negotiated and the community's values are honored, but rarely are problems solved in the sense that the problem is no longer an issue. The conversation is ongoing, interrupted by new actions and ideas that change its dynamics. Exhibit 2 represents this process as the cycle of deliberative practice.

EXHIBIT 2 | **THE CYCLE OF DELIBERATIVE PRACTICE**



The City of Pittsburgh used deliberative community forums to engage citizens in planning for the capital budget. The forum took place after the mayor had announced the priorities for his administration but before the city departments made funding requests. The goal of the forum was to help refine the city's priorities and provide departments with more citizen perspectives that could help them develop their funding requests. You can read more about the process used by Pittsburgh in **A Handbook for Deliberative Community Forums**. The exit survey for the forum showed that most participants agreed that the forum achieved the points listed below. Notice the connection with the new purposes and principles for public engagement that we described earlier:

- Gave participants an understanding of the issues involved when developing the city's capital budget *(align public expectations with what government can realistically accomplish)*
- Caused participants to consider points of view that they had not previously considered *(engage with complexity)*
- Made participants feel as though their voice had been heard by the city *(establish legitimacy as an institution)*
- Made participants more likely to engage in making their neighborhood stronger *(see our Principle 6, revitalize "responsibilities" that go along with "rights")*

Using techniques like Turn the Curve planning or deliberative community forums build the institutional capacity to deal with complex problems on an ongoing basis. However, these benefits come at the cost of time and effort for organizers and participants. Thus, we must remind ourselves of Principle 1: Local governments must pick opportunities to use these methods judiciously yet also use them often enough to retain institutional capacity. Like athletic ability, this institutional capacity is "use or lose it." It is not "in case of emergency, break glass."

Finally, a point about how **not** to engage with complexity: Avoid the temptation to oversimplify complex situations. Oversimplification usually involves fitting complex problems into categories.[26] The most potentially damaging is making a binary choice out of a complex problem, like might be the case in a referendum. This forces people to pick a side and discourages investigating the nuances of complex problems. Similarly, highlighting or emphasizing people's group membership risks, inviting an "us versus them" mentality. This is because it activates a person's identity as a member of a group that has a position or stake in the issue. Instead, try to activate a shared identity of being part of a larger group that is jointly seeking solutions to a shared problem. As an example, research suggests that when public safety executives (e.g., a fire or police chief) come to a budgeting meeting in their uniform, their identity as a police officer or a firefighter is activated. This makes them more likely to push for decisions that benefit their department. Conversely, if they come dressed in civilian clothing, like everyone else, it activates their identity as a member of the broader local government, which encourages decisions that benefit that group.[27]

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

- What are the complex issues in your community that inspire public passion?
- Can you engage the public with Turn the Curve or deliberative community forums?
- What outside organizations could help you convene such an event and add to the credibility of the proceedings?

PRINCIPLE 5

Push Back Against the Politics of Cynicism With the Politics of Co-Creation

Local governments can partially offset the politics of cynicism by fostering a politics of co-creation. Public engagement can be designed to promote mutual understanding and jointly working toward solutions. Our earlier discussion of deliberative community forums suggested how this could be done, but let's examine some other approaches to co-creation.

Rather than focusing on what divides the community, public engagement can focus on what unites it. This approach to public engagement is known as "appreciative inquiry." The premise of appreciative inquiry is to focus participants on agreeing on what they like or value about the community and how to build on those strengths and do more of what people like. This stands in contrast to the politics of cynicism, which focuses on what people are against. The general approach to appreciative inquiry is:

- **Appreciate:** Identify what participants like or feel positively about with respect to the community; or find "bright spots" within the issue under discussion. What have been instances of success or positive experiences?
- **Innovate and design:** Decide how to preserve or do more of the things people like or value; or expand or multiply the "bright spots."
- **Deploy:** Put the designs into practice.

In Northern Colorado, for example, the projected increase in residents over the age 65 as the baby boomers retire was startling. An increase of 130% was estimated over the next 10 years. Some communities framed this phenomenon as the "silver tsunami" that would overwhelm public services and health care systems. Using an appreciative inquiry approach, a newly formed collaborative that would become the Larimer County Partnership for Age Friendly Communities shifted the conversation. They asked what sort of community people wanted for their aging residents? They asked what was going well currently that made the area a great place to retire, and how could they work together to maintain or enhance those aspects. They asked what challenges will arise that need to be understood and tackled. As part of the process, they recognized that younger retirees are a wonderful asset to a community and often seek to be involved and helpful. One of the processes was titled "Silver Tsunami as Golden Opportunity," to identify the upside of the phenomenon and accentuate the opportunities.

Another related approach to co-creation is that citizens could be asked to define the values that will be used to help navigate and negotiate the trade-offs that complex problems demand. Professional administrators are not well placed to define those values on behalf of the public.[28] It might be difficult, if not impossible, for the public to come to consensus around any given programmatic solution, especially at the outset of public engagement. It will be less difficult to come to agreement on the positive, constructive values that should guide decision-making. In our polarized political environment, many people will be surprised to find that they can reach common ground on values with people who hold different positions on a given issue. One of the leading psychological theories on why people disagree on politics is **Moral Foundations Theory**. It tells us that there are six fundamental moral building blocks that form the basis of an individual's ethics. Everyone has the same building blocks but emphasizes them differently when applying them to ethical decisions and political positions. Let's consider police and public safety as an example—a controversial topic in some communities. Citizens can differ on their position about the right amount of resources devoted to policing versus other types of public safety strategies but likely can agree on values like: people should feel **safe from harm**, and people should be treated **fairly** by law enforcement. An aversion to seeing harm done to others and fair treatment for everyone are two of the six moral foundations. These values, along with others, could provide the start to finding common ground on public safety and support decisions about the best way to use public safety resources.

The **Rethinking Budgeting initiative**, working with the Constructive Dialogue Institute, has developed **a proven approach for applying Moral Foundations Theory** to workplaces and other organizations.

The limitation of these approaches is that sometimes there are conflicts that need to be addressed head-on. A technique called "polarity management" can help. Continuing with our police budget example, the debate may seem to be one of increasing or decreasing the police budget. We know that a compromise between these two positions may be ineffective, if it is even possible.

Polarity management is a process of acknowledging and leveraging different and incompatible viewpoints.[29] Leveraging a polarity involves understanding the limits of "either/or" thinking. Polarity thinking involves embracing "both/and" thinking because, over time, both poles (i.e., solutions) are needed. Polarity thinking allows a team to articulate and record multiple viewpoints and then strategize to maximize the benefits and minimize the negative facets of both poles. This shifts conversations from an adversarial frame to a collaborative one that can support creativity and co-creation. Former adversaries suddenly find themselves in agreement about needing to focus on achieving the upside of each pole and avoiding the downside. For example, some people in the community might be concerned with deterring crime, so they want a large law enforcement presence. Other people might be concerned with engaging the community in public safety, including exploring alternatives to traditional policing. These might seem to be incompatible positions, but polarity management can be used to see how both perspectives can contribute to the goal of a community that is safe and feels safe. Exhibit 3 shows a sample polarity map (a tool that can be used for polarity management). The common goal of a safe community is at the top. The positive and negative implications of each polarity (law enforcement versus

EXHIBIT 3 | **SAMPLE POLARITY MAP**

Greater Purpose Statement (GPS) – Why leverage this polarity?

A community that is safe and feels safe

ACTION STEPS

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

A. Ensure police transparency to increase trust
B. Police proactively build relationships with key community leaders
C. Review existing laws and policies to ensure they are just and fair

EARLY WARNINGS

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this left pole.

A. Decreased trust and increased fear in the community
B. Increasing complaints of police abuse of power

Values = positive results of focus on the left pole

- Reduction of crime and victimization
- Increased sense of safety
- Community pride and positive reputation

Law Enforcement

- Individual rights are compromised, police state
- Polarized community between those with power and those without power
- Law enforcement is remedial and not preventative

Fears = negative results of over-focus on the left pole to the neglect of the right pole

AND

Values = positive results of focus on the right pole

- Reduced conflict between police and community members
- Increased respect
- Police and citizens partner in creating a safe community

Community Engagement

- Lose the big picture of community/police safety
- Lack of accountability for individuals and lack of justice for victims
- Police lack support and resources to keep community safe

Fears = negative results of over-focus on the right pole to the neglect of the left pole

ACTION STEPS

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this right pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

A. Invest in high quality community engagement
B. Explore alternatives to traditional policing methods
C. Build partnerships across disciplines and sectors focused on community safety

EARLY WARNINGS

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this right pole.

A. Police feel unable to do their jobs — reflected in police turnover, absenteeism...
B. Increase in crime rate

Rampant crime and distrust and fear of police

Deeper Fear – Loss of GPS

community engagement) are then explored on the left and right sides, respectively. The map is used to find action steps that can promote the positive implications of each polarity, and to identify warning signs that the community may be overemphasizing one polarity or the other. A map like this can help the advocates of each polarity see how they can work together with the other side toward a common goal.

The "**Participatory Budgeting Project**" is another approach to engaging citizens in co-creation. In Participatory Budgeting, a set amount of money is made available for a defined segment of the community (e.g., a neighborhood). Next, members of that community are invited to produce ideas for projects to improve their community. The ideas are then voted on by the community members, and the winning projects are funded up to the amount made available by the local government. Participatory Budgeting puts citizens in charge of deciding how to use money to make a visible impact where they live. The advantage is that citizens play a leading role in a process for deciding how to use public money, including seeing the real-life impact. The downside is that it is limited to a small portion of the local government budget and may not provide much guidance to elected officials on larger questions of budget policy.

If you engage citizens as collaborative problem-solvers, you may activate a more productive form of participation that not only leads to better ideas but also is likely to spark their continued support through implementation.

Finally, the most ambitious form of co-creation is to engage organizations from outside of government to address complex problems. The public can be involved in co-creating an inspiring vision for their community, which then serves to convene organizations from across the community around making the vision a reality. Thousands of San Antonio citizens took part in creating the **San Antonio 2020** vision. Several public, private, and nonprofit organizations are active participants in moving the vision forward toward reality. The vision has had staying power: It has survived three changes in mayoral administrations. Collaboration across the community to form and maintain the vision has been essential to the vision's longevity. You can read more about San Antonio's vision and comparable efforts in other communities in **this GFOA report**.[30]

In the end, public engagement often hinges on what role you are asking or allowing citizens to play. If you provide opportunities for them to complain, you will hear complaints. If you let them react to proposals developed without their input, those who support the proposals are likely to stay home, and those who do not stay home will show up in force to complain and express their cynicism. But if you engage them as collaborative problem-solvers, you may activate a more productive form of participation that not only leads to better ideas but also is likely to spark their continued support through implementation.

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

- What opportunities do you have to apply the politics of co-creation to your community?
- Are there issues where appreciative inquiry could help?
- Could it be valuable to engage the public in defining the values that guide or inform budgeting and policy decisions?
- Could participatory budgeting help citizens decide how public money is used and see the impact in their community?
- If you are facing a clear conflict, could polarity management help you navigate that conflict?
- How can you engage outside organizations in the solution to the issue you are facing?

PRINCIPLE 6

Revitalize the "Responsibilities" That Go Along With "Rights"

In a democratic form of government, citizens have certain rights and responsibilities to uphold the democratic government that guarantees those rights. In the heyday of traditional budgeting, the 1950s through the 1970s, a strong sense of communitarianism prevailed, marked by interdependence and cooperation. Since then, individualism has become more prevalent, marked by independence and egoism.[31] As individualism has become dominant in recent decades, there has been more emphasis on individual rights and less on the collective responsibility to maintain the system that guarantees those rights. When it comes to local government, this can result in, for example, people placing demands on the local government without considering the need to contribute to addressing the issues the community faces.

Local government can reinvigorate the discussion of the responsibility citizens have under a democratic system and find balance between rights and responsibilities. This can start by shifting the fundamental question being asked of citizens from "What do you want?" to "What would you do?" and, ultimately, "What should *we* do?" (the government and public together). This takes the citizen out of the role of an individualistic consumer of public services to being part of a team effort to address community problems. This shift can have another, perhaps unexpected, benefit: creating empathy for public officials. Once citizens realize that the choices are hard, they may come to better understand the realities and limitations of government.

Once citizens realize that the choices are hard, they may come to better understand the realities and limitations of government.

The best way to bring this perspective into public engagement in planning and budgeting is to require participants to work through making trade-offs. So rather than asking for more, they must decide what they are willing to give up to get it. Ideally, this would include conversations with fellow citizens and negotiating preferences in a group setting.

The deliberative processes we discussed in Principle 4 could help. Deliberative engagement shifts the focus of the conversation from blaming others for problems to taking accountability. Overall, deliberative processes ask, "What should WE do about this problem we share?"

This leads us to a more powerful expression of citizen responsibility: coproduction. In Principle 5, we discussed co-creation, which involves developing a shared, positive vision for moving the community forward. Coproduction is "a process through which inputs from individuals who are not in the same organization are transformed into goods and services."[32] When citizens actively contribute to civic discourse, they not only inform public policies, they can become co-producers with government in the delivery of services. Rather than playing a passive role with government acting on their behalf, as co-producers, citizens become active contributors "in the conception, design, steering, and management of public goods and services."[33] Public engagement works best when it is woven into the fabric of civic life, creating a culture of shared problem-solving. It is more than an initiative dusted off at budget time and then mothballed until the following year. Coproduction is about building civic capacity and aligning professional routines with the work citizens do to fix public problems. Through public engagement, citizens and local government officials are able to identify community assets and resources that can be garnered to address public problems and coproduce the goods and services that enhance and support economic viability and civic life.

We can see an example of coproduction from the City of Hampton, Virginia. In Hampton, a group of community organizers requested the city to finance construction and operation of a new neighborhood center for sports and educational programs, even though there was a city-funded recreation center less than two miles away. While the city and community had different interests, a deliberative public engagement process led to an acceptable solution for all parties. The city and neighborhood residents agreed to work together to find a viable solution. The city agreed to renovate and maintain a vacant and abandoned junior high school originally built for black students that closed in 1968 when public schools were integrated. Neighborhood residents volunteered to operate the facility, including providing program and staff support. This win-win scenario resulted in the adaptive reuse of a vacant and abandoned historic school building in the African American community that many residents had a sentimental attachment to; the opportunity for neighborhood residents to provide the programs and services they wanted; and a partnership between the neighborhood and city hall that met the interests of both. The Yarborough Henry Thomas Community Center has been in operation for almost 30 years, offering a mix of public and community programs for neighborhood residents.

Here are more examples of public engagement mechanisms that foster citizen responsibility for their government by engaging them in making trade-offs and/or coproduction.

- **Budget games or simulations** put participants in the position of proposing hypothetical solutions to balance a budget. This requires participants to engage with the hard trade-offs that balancing a budget requires.
- **Charrettes** are often used in the design of buildings, parks, transportation systems, etc.[34] They are used to bring together stakeholders, identify issues, and work together to find solutions. Charrettes could work for issues besides infrastructure, where experts and community members must work together to solve a problem.
- **Asset maps** catalog important services and resources in the community.[35] Knowing the resources available across the community to address complex problems is the first step to engaging those resources in coproduction.
- Neighborhood councils could be used not only to identify issues the neighborhood is concerned about but also mobilize residents to address the issue.

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

- How are you engaging citizens in considering the hard trade-offs inherent in budgeting and engaging them in being an active part of the solution?
- What opportunities do you have to engage citizens in coproduction of public services?
- What potential might deliberative forums, budget games, charrettes, asset mapping, neighborhood councils, or other methods have for revitalizing responsibilities to go along with rights?

PRINCIPLE 7

Develop Robust Strategies for Dealing With Bad Actors

The unfortunate companion to the politics of cynicism is the proliferation of "bad actors" in public engagement. Bad actors disrupt public engagement, eschew compromise, and impede productive conversation. The solution starts with recognizing that not all bad actors are the same. We will break them down into two categories: Conventional bad actors are not necessarily out to intentionally sabotage public engagement or spread misinformation. They may feel like they are not being heard or may hold beliefs that are extreme or misguided. This is distinct from what we might term "bad-faith actors," who are unwilling to engage in a good-faith conversation about the issues at hand. They might even personally gain from continued conflict. For example, they gain personal satisfaction or status among their peers by "standing up to government." Local government can design public engagement to limit the damage that both kinds of bad actors can do and limit their influence.

A starting point is to design public engagement to strive for "procedural justice". Procedural justice is the sense that the process used to reach a decision was fair. Are the decision-makers doing their best to be objective and neutral? Is it clear how the process works? Are participants treated with dignity, and do they have a voice? Procedural justice is critical because people are more willing to accept a decision or action that goes against their self-interest when they perceive that the process that led to the decision was fair and transparent.[36] The most intransigent bad-faith actors may only be satisfied by getting all of what they want or perhaps can't ever be satisfied. But procedural justice helps ensure that more persuadable participants are willing to support (or at least not fight) decisions that do not align with their self-interest. You can consult GFOA's "**What's Fair?**" series for more on how to create procedural justice, particularly **Part 1** of the series.

Fairness is a multifaceted concept, encompassing more than procedural justice. Keeping a focus on fairness can help navigate potential conflicts with members of the public and limit the ability of bad actors to foment discontent. The **What's Fair?** series provides guidance on many elements of fairness. Two with relevance to our discussion in this paper are:

Understanding political polarization. How we decide what is fair is rooted in moral thinking. Different opinions on fairness can stem from different values and how those values are applied. A leading theory in moral psychology is Moral Foundations Theory. This framework asserts that all people have the same six moral foundations (building blocks from which they form their moral worldview). Understanding these moral foundations and how they are applied helps us communicate across political divides. In fact, GFOA conducted a pilot training in Moral Foundations Theory with hundreds of local government officials. The pilot showed that **officials can dramatically improve their ability to navigate political polarization**.

Distrust, opposition, and political extremes. We can think of people at the political extremes as being more sensitive to how government policy matches or does not match their moral values. Thus, understanding the moral concerns behind their opposition and distrust will be needed to have productive conversations or reach mutually agreeable resolutions.

So, what about the bad-*faith* actors who will not be moved by fairness? How can they be addressed? There are several strategies for doing so.

First, many of the features of deliberative engagement that we discussed (see Principle 4) change the dynamics that bad actors usually take advantage of. At a public hearing with a single microphone, those with simple stories (good versus bad) and high confidence (they are enlightened and others are idiots) are rewarded. Those who are considering multiple perspectives and struggling with the trade-offs have

In a deliberative discussion, simple solutions to complex problems seem out of place, even ridiculous. Nuance is welcomed and rewarded. New ideas are nurtured, and human creativity and problem-solving is sparked.

no clear place. In a deliberative discussion, the opposite environment can be developed. Simple solutions to complex problems seem out of place, even ridiculous. Nuance is welcomed and rewarded. New ideas are nurtured, and human creativity and problem-solving is sparked.

Next, an approach with wide application is to design public engagement to take place in small groups. Many engagement designs revolve around small group conversations, where summaries of the small group conversations are then aggregated to get an impression from across the entire group of participants. Many bad actors, for example, will not be attracted to grandstand in front of a handful of other people; the small audience defeats the purpose. Even if the small group format does not dissuade the bad actor, at least the damage from their participation will be contained to a limited number of people.

Lastly, well-trained facilitators have tools they could use to help manage bad actors. Often, bad actors are misdiagnosed as having negative motives. The real issue is that they do not feel heard or respected. A quality process—where a facilitator engages the participants and notetakers capture participants' ideas in a small group setting that allows everyone to talk—will help address those concerns. If the bad actor continues to be a problem, more interventions can be invoked, such as asking probing questions to help them consider broader perspectives, creating ground rules, or making explicit space for other speakers. Not all bad actors can be controlled by facilitation moves. If they are intent on disrupting a process, it can be difficult to prevent. But bad actors have much less power and facilitators have many more tools to work with in small, facilitated deliberations compared to processes where a microphone is available in front of the crowd.

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

- Do we recognize the difference between conventional bad actors and the difficult, bad-faith actors?
- Are we intentional about designing public engagement so that participants feel they are being fairly treated?
- Are we designing the engagement to minimize the potential for bad actors, like using deliberative engagement methods, small group discussions, and trained facilitators?

PRINCIPLE 8

Understand the Role of the "Expert" and Play It With Care

Earlier, we described how the legitimacy of government has been called into question. Related to this is a loss of faith in expertise. For example, one survey found that "about half to three-quarters (of those surveyed) think it is better to rely on people with practical experience to solve pressing problems in society than to rely on those with expertise. Public skepticism of relying on experts is shared across those on the right and left."[37] The implication is the public is less likely than in the past to defer to the expertise of a local government's professional staff. Public engagement must be designed accordingly.

Primarily, public engagement needs to take on a facilitative tone. Instead of seeking to "educate" the public on the facts as local officials see them, it may be more fruitful to facilitate a process of discovery, where citizens learn about an issue for themselves. Being presented with a set of facts is not a surefire way to change someone's mind. Deliberative democracy methods (Principle 4) and polarity management (Principle 6) are methods that invite participants to learn about issues for themselves and evolve how they think about the issue.

It is worth recalling our earlier distinction between "complex" and "complicated" problems. Complicated problems are where experts shine. Who better to fix a jet engine than an expert on jet engines? Complex problems, though, are resistant to expertise in a couple of ways. We already discussed that professional staff are ill-suited to define the values that should be used to weigh the trade-offs between possible solutions. Also, because of the moving parts and unpredictable interactions between those parts, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know the forces that underlie a complex problem or how a proposed solution will play out. This means that experts can easily be second-guessed and discredited if they express overconfident beliefs about a complex problem. There are at least three implications that follow from this:

- **When it comes to complex problems, have experts "on tap, not on top."** We saw in our description of deliberative democracy that experts should be available to help answer factual questions. However, experts cannot make the final call because, rightly, professional public servants should avoid imposing their values on the public. Further, experts tend to overemphasize what can be easily observed and measured, when the intangibles might be given a lot more weight by the public. For example, experts could frame viable options for the public to deliberate on and weigh pros and cons. This would avoid imposing a solution and provides space for the public's take on the pros and cons, which might differ from the experts'.
- **Leave complicated problems to the experts.** For these types of problems, there often are technically superior or even "right" answers that experts have that the public does not. At best, engaging the public on complicated problems may be time and energy better spent somewhere else. At worst, it could result in suboptimal solutions and breed skepticism about public engagement among local government officials, as it highlights the amateur status of the public. For example, one of the authors of this paper encountered a local government that was considering using public engagement to help decide the number of firefighters to put on a firetruck. We would suggest that professional firefighters are the right people to decide this, and public engagement energy could be better spent elsewhere. That said, there may be exceptions, like using public input to help choose between technically proficient options to solve some problem.
- **Professional staff should remain humble about their expertise.** In today's environment, professing expertise can rub audiences the wrong way, and the information tsunami makes it easy to find information to discredit those who do. For a cautionary tale, see our COVID sidebar.

Finally, we will address the average citizen's lack of knowledge of how local governments operate. This can be viewed as an obstacle to engagement, but there are many solutions. First, some issues the public is interested in may not require much, if any, special knowledge about local government operations. Earlier, we gave an example of engaging the public in a discussion about how to preserve tree coverage in the community. The only knowledge needed from the participants was the difference between trees on public versus private property. This was explained in minutes to those who did not appreciate the difference. This demonstrates the second solution. Often, knowledge that is needed can usually be provided as part of the public engagement event. For example, the City of Dubuque developed a short primer on city government to help prepare participants for a discussion about prioritizing capital projects. This primer was more effort than a short conversation—like in our tree example—but it was not overly burdensome for the city and did provide participants with valuable context. If the issues at hand are more complex than can be explained in a brief period, a local government could select an engagement method that provides the time and resources for in-depth examination of the issue. A citizen "blue ribbon committee" is a well-known variant of this approach, and "**citizen assemblies**" are a modern approach that have been used successfully in many governments to address complicated and complex issues.[38] Lastly, if an issue does span jurisdictional boundaries, the engagement could include representatives of all the relevant governments. For example, a meeting about spending on school safety could be cosponsored by the school district and the municipal police department.

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

- Is the issue you are thinking about engaging the public on complex or complicated? If it is complex, how can you engage the public in a process of learning about the issue, with experts in a supporting role? If it is complicated, will this issue be the best use of your limited resource for public engagement?
- If it is important to engage the public on a complicated issue, what is it that you want the public to weigh in on? Is that topic something where the public brings a different and valuable perspective?

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, THE EXPOSURE OF THE "NOBLE LIE," AND THE LESSON FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the public's trust in medical expertise. For example, less than half of Americans have a great deal of trust in state and local health departments.[39] The causes for this are complicated, but one contributing factor is the inconsistent messaging coming from public health experts. According to the Los Angeles Times, in February and March 2019, both the Surgeon General and Center for Disease Control made unequivocal statements that the general public did not need to wear face masks.[40] The statements implied or even said outright that masks are ineffective for preventing disease The motive appears to have been to prevent hoarding and save a limited supply of masks for frontline health workers. Well-intentioned as this "noble lie" might have been, the wide availability of information made it easy for people to question this guidance when first released and, of course, to point out the contradictions when later guidance encouraged masks even when walking outside or after receiving the vaccine. The lesson for local government planning and budgeting is that even the most credentialed experts can be swamped by an information tsunami, so remain humble about the position experts have and be mindful of maintaining the public's trust when wielding expertise.

PRINCIPLE 9

Balance Expert Judgment and Public Engagement for Planning and Budgeting

This principle flows from the previous principle. Public engagement is distinct from direct democracy. The public that engages on a given issue will almost never be representative of all the people a government serves. Certainly, there are steps that government can and should take to expand the scope of people who participate,[41] but true representativeness is impossible. Consider two simple examples. First, for any issue, there will always be part of the population that does not have a strong enough opinion to justify investing their time and energy in participation. Thus, people with the most moderate views will be underrepresented. Second, sometimes a particular individual is asked to participate as a representative of their group. However, no group is a monolith, and there is no guarantee that any individual knows the full range of the group's views or can accurately represent them. So, what should be done?

First, do not think of public engagement as an exercise in direct democracy. Instead, think of it as an effort to make sense of and listen to the concerns of those for whom the stakes are highest. That could be people who are most caught up in conflicts around a given issue, or it could be marginalized citizens who have consistently gotten the short end of the public policy stick. There are strategies for how to design public engagement to make it more likely that underrepresented groups will participate.[42]

Second, complement in-person engagement with broader methods of making sense of the public's views, like surveys. Surveys and public engagement contextualize each other. Let's consider the following as an illustration of the need for broader sense-making. During the summer of 2020, in some communities, there were highly publicized calls to "defund the police"; however, these calls were largely from activists whose views were overrepresented by platforms like social media and skewed media coverage. Surveys showed little support for defunding the police among the broader population, including among minority groups.[43] Surveys and "thicker" public engagement processes, like forums, provide distinct insights into public perspectives and can complement each other when designed and interpreted well.

Do not think of public engagement as an exercise in direct democracy. Instead, think of it as an effort to make sense of and listen to the concerns of those for whom the stakes are highest.

Third, the planning and budgeting process should weave together the public and expert inputs. Both are critical, and processes that let either dominate too much can be problematic. For example, expert domination risks focusing only on what is easily measured and ignoring less easily measurable things like culture, politics, and community practices. Public domination risks amateur and suboptimal solutions for technical problems. Quality processes often bounce back and forth between the two, with elected officials and city leaders working to have expert and public voices inform the other.

Finally, public officials can think of the results from public engagement as "design constraints." Design constraints limit the ways in which someone can design a solution. We live in a representative democracy, where elected officials are expected to make wise choices on behalf of all their fellow citizens. Public engagement helps elected officials make wiser planning and budgeting choices but does not take away their role as the final decision-maker. It is worth repeating that public engagement should: A) take place with an issue where there is room for public input, where a direction has not already been decided; B) happen early enough in the decision-making process that the "constraints" provided by the public don't have a hard time fitting in with existing commitments on how the issue in question should be handled; and C) be clear with participants about what their role is and make sure they have the correct expectations of what could result from their participation. The biggest point here is to distinguish if participants are making the decision or providing a source of input that will be used by public officials to help make the final decision.

Public engagement helps elected officials make wiser planning and budgeting choices but does not take away their role as the final decision-maker.

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

- Are we comfortable with the fact that the participants in public engagement are *highly unlikely* to be representative of the entire community but that public engagement can still make a positive contribution to democratic discourse? The key to resolving this seeming paradox is to place public engagement in the larger context of a system of democratically elected representative government, not to see it as a self-contained event.
- Is your public engagement getting the views of people for whom the stakes are the highest?
- What other methods do you have to make sense of citizens' view on an issue, besides public engagement?
- How will the results of public engagement be fed into the budget and contribute to wiser decisions for the *entire* community?

PRINCIPLE 10

Design Public Engagement to Work for Elected Officials

Public officials stand to gain from high-quality public engagement, but public engagement will not go far if elected officials are not supportive of it. Throughout this paper, we have made the positive case for high-quality public engagement. That may be enough for many elected officials; others might have concerns that prevent them from embracing it. Below are potential concerns along with how those concerns can be addressed:

- **They have been turned off from public engagement by bad experiences with the conventional public hearing.** Show how a new approach to public engagement addresses the problems associated with conventional public engagement.
- **They have come into office with a strong personal vision or goals and do not feel the need for public input into that vision.** Complex issues often require the public to play a role in the solution. The best way to get the public to act is to have them be a part of the process, including shared ownership of the resulting solution. The vision has a better chance of being achieved and having lasting impact if the public is involved. Public engagement can respect the core of the elected official's vision and goals, and invite the public to help refine them and get involved in making them a reality.
- **They feel they already know what the public wants.** Wanting it and getting it are two different things. Public engagement can help refine citizens' relationship with government by fostering more realistic expectations of government and involving citizens in co-creation of solutions.

The best way to get the public to act is to have them be a part of the process, including shared ownership of the resulting solution.

- **They see public engagement as risky for their political future.** High-quality public engagement can reduce risk by helping elected officials decide if the time is ripe for action on a controversial issue or if more discussion is needed—and by providing some political cover for making difficult decisions. Also, there is evidence that the public has more confidence in elected officials where high-quality public engagement occurs.[44]
- **They do not want to invest their own time in engaging the public.** Design a process that does not require a direct investment of the official's time.

Also, the other nine design principles can help ensure public engagement works for elected officials. For example, Principle 1 helps pick an issue where there is room for public engagement, where elected officials have not already settled on a direction. Principle 7 describes how to deal with bad actors and design a fair process that reduces the risk of destructive conflict. Principle 9 emphasizes that public engagement does not override elected officials' role as the government's decision-maker.

Conclusion

Local governments have entered a period that is unprecedented in the post-World War II era, characterized by challenges to democratic governance. Chief among them might be the fracturing of the public into rival groups, which encourages blaming others for problems rather than jointly seeking solutions. There is also widespread distrust of institutions, with government being no exception. But at the same time, there are unrealistic expectations for what government can accomplish, with disappointment in government usually being the result. All of this contributes to a politics of cynicism, which offers opposition to the status quo as a rallying point but which offers no solutions for the way forward.

Though it will not be easy, local government can play a role in restoring a sense of community, belonging, and trust.

Though it will not be easy, local government can play a role in restoring a sense of community, belonging, and trust. In fact, though the current conditions are unprecedented in the last 70 years, they are not unprecedented in American history. The esteemed sociologist Robert Putnam points out that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, America was in a position not so different from today in terms of polarization, distrust, cynicism, etc. What was known as the "Progressive era" of reform in the 1920s saw changes in American society that helped reverse these maladies. One of those changes was the reform of local government to the institutions we have now.[45] Another of those changes was a civic revival, characterized by active citizenship and pursuit of pragmatic, not ideological, solutions to complex problems.[46] Today's local governments could contribute to a similar reversal of today's social ills by encouraging high-quality public engagement that gives citizens the opportunity to be part of meaningful conversations about the future of their community and taking responsibility for bringing those plans to fruition.

A Checklist for Rethinking Public Engagement

The following set of principals are designed to help local governments build trust and strengthen relationships with the public. Because there's no one-size-fits-all solution, they should be used selectively; applied where they best fit and left aside where they don't.

Focus on quality over quantity
Determine which issues, if any, might benefit most from public engagement.

Build and bolster democratic institutions
Build on-going capacity for high-quality public engagement, whether through your own staff or external resources.

Think of public engagement as a process of sense-making
Use surveys, citizen comments, and open houses to gather input and use deliberative engagement methods to turn it into understanding and wisdom.

Help the public engage with complex problems
Consider which complex issues in your community inspire the most public passion and develop deliberative engagement methods to discuss those issues.

Push back against the politics of cynicism
Develop opportunities for participants co-create the future in collaboration with government, rather than just object to the status quo.

Revitalize the responsibilities that go along with rights
Engage citizens in considering the hard trade-offs inherent in budgeting and in being an active part of the solution to community problems.

Develop robust strategies for dealing with bad actors
Distinguish between conventional "bad actors" and "bad-faith actors." The former may sincerely wish to participate but may need special handling. The latter may be out to sabotage the process, so may need to be contained.

Understand the role of the expert and play it with care
When considering engaging the public with a complex issue, design a process for learning about the issue with experts in a supporting rather than a leadership role.

Find the best solutions by balancing inputs from experts and the public
Develop engagement processes that bounce back and forth between the expert and public opinion, with elected officials and city leaders working to have expert and public voices inform the other.

Make public engagement work for elected officials
Diagnose the concerns elected officials may have about public engagement and design engagement to address those concerns. For example, if elected officials have been turned off by bad experiences with public engagement, show how a new process can avoid repeating past problems.

ENDNOTES

[1] Definition from Chapter 2: Nabatchi, T. & Leighninger, M. (2015). *Public participation for 21st century democracy*. Jossey-Bass.

[2] The four reasons are inspired by: Gurri, M. (2018, December 4). *The revolt of the public and the crisis of authority in the new millennium*. (2nd ed.). Stripe Press.

[3] See for example: https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/#income-inequality-in-the-u-s-has-increased-since-1980-and-is-greater-than-in-peer-countries and https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2015/demo/gini-index-of-money-income-and-equivalence-adjusted-income--1967.html

[4] "Information tsunami" coined by: Gurri, M. (2018, December 4). *The revolt of the public and the crisis of authority in the new millennium*. (2nd ed.). Stripe Press.

[5] The modern media environment has been described as an attention economy, where securing advertising dollars requires drawing viewership, and the most reliable way to draw viewership is to provoke outrage.

[6] In 2019, the Pew Research Center found that over half of Americans (54%) either got their news "sometimes" or "often" from social media. Facebook was the most popular social media site where American adults got their news.

[7] This includes social media of all flavors, cable television, YouTube, news websites, and more.

[8] Survey results provided directly to GFOA by Polco.

[9] This is closely related to the concept of "wicked problems" in public discourse. For one of the earliest discussions of this topic, see: Rittel, H.W.J. & Webber, M.M. (1973, June). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4(2), 155–169.

[10] GFOA's Financial Foundations Framework identifies "Fair Treatment" as one of the five pillars of a solid financial foundation. Equity is one facet of fairness within that pillar. An example of a more recent publication is: Kavanagh, S. & Kowalski, J. (2021, February). *The basics of equity in budgeting*. Government Finance Officers Association.

[11] For survey data and other data on this point, see: Putnam, R.D. & Garrett, S.R. (2020). *The upswing: How America came together a century ago and how we can do it again*. Simon & Schuster, New York.

[12] In "Why do we need to rethink budgeting?" we describe increased conflict in society as one of the primary forces that call for a rethinking of budgeting.

[13] Carcasson, M. (Spring 2018). Why process matters: Democracy and human nature. *National Civic Review*.

[14] Study performed by: Knight Foundation. (2009). *Soul of the community*.

[15] See also: Wang, X., & Bryer, T.A. (2013). Assessing the costs of public participation: A case study of two online participation mechanisms. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 43(2), 179–199.

[16] See IAP2's "Spectrum of Public Participation." This widely cited model can be found at: iap2.org

[17] An example is the typical online poll where whoever clicks a link can answer the poll.

[18] Friedman, W. (2020). *Reframing "framing."* Center for Advances in Public Engagement. https://publicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Reframing-Framing.pdf

[19] For more details on how to conduct deliberative engagement, you can consult the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation's "Resource Guide on Public Engagement" at: https://www.ncdd.org/resource-guide.html

[20] Carcasson, M. (Spring 2018). Why process matters: Democracy and human nature. *National Civic Review*.

[21] This is like the concept of "wicked problems" often described in public engagement literature. We have chosen "complex" problems to remain consistent with the theme that complexity is a primary force behind the need to rethink budgeting.

[22] Kavanagh, S. & Kleine, A. (2022). *Defining the problem: The missing piece to local government planning*. Government Finance Officers Association.

[23] Description of deliberative community forums from: "A Handbook for Deliberative Community Forums." Prepared for the City of Pittsburgh by The Program for Deliberative Democracy, Carnegie Mellon University And The Art of Democracy.

[24] Friedman, W. (2020). *Reframing "framing."* Center for Advances in Public Engagement. https://www.publicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Reframing-Framing.pdf

[25] Carcasson, M., & Sprain, L. (2016). Beyond problem solving: Reconceptualizing the work of public deliberation as deliberative inquiry. *Communication Theory*, 26(1), 41–63. https://cpd.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/03/Carcasson-Sprain-beyond-problem-solving.pdf

[26] Ripley, A. (2021). *High conflict: Why we get trapped and how we get out.* Simon and Schuster, New York.

[27] Van Bavel, J.J. & Packer, D.J. (2021). *The power of us: Harnessing our shared identities to improve performance, increase cooperation, and promote social harmony.* Little, Brown Spark.

[28] The question of the public versus elected officials and technocrats weighing values has been long discussed in public administration. A classic debate was formed between two scholars, Carl Friedrich and Herman Finer, regarding administrative responsibility. Some of their original research is published in the following: Stillman, R. (2010). *Public administration: Concepts and cases* (9th ed.). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.

[29] Johnson, B. (2014). *Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems*. HRD Press.

[30] Kavanagh, S. (November 2020). *Network enterprises—An information age solution to enduring problems?* Government Finance Officers Association.

[31] For survey data and other data on this point, see: Putnam, R.D. & Garrett, S.R. (2020). *The upswing: How America came together a century ago and how we can do it again*. Simon & Schuster, New York.

[32] Ostrom, E. (1996). Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, synergy, and development. *World Development*, 24(6), 1073. Copyright 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

[33] Definition of coproduction, Wikipedia.

[34] For going deeper into charrettes, you can visit: https://www.canr.msu.edu/nci

[35] For going deeper into asset mapping, you can visit: https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/resources/Pages/tool-kit.aspx

[36] Research on this point is discussed in more depth in: Kavanagh, S.C. & Reitano, V. (2020). *Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities*. Government Finance Officers Association.

[37] Funk, C., Tyson, A., Kennedy, B. & Johnson, C. (2020). *Science and Scientists Held in High Esteem Across Global Publics: 1. Scientists are among the most trusted groups in society, though many value practical experience over expertise*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/09/29/scientists-are-among-the-most-trusted-groups-in-society-though-many-value-practical-experience-over-expertise

[38] For more on citizen assemblies, visit: https://citizensassemblies.org

[39] According to a 2021 poll by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

[40] Netburn, D. (2021). A timeline of the CDC's advice on face masks. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2021-07-27/timeline-cdc-mask-guidance-during-covid-19-pandemic

[41] Examples include providing day care, compensation for travel, or even time, holding the event in a convenient location and time, and holding the event in a location that is inviting to participants.

[42] Examples include providing day care, compensation for travel, or even time, holding the event in a convenient location and time, and holding the event in a location that is inviting to participants.

[43] See for example the July 22 Gallup and June 11 YouGov surveys.

[44] For research on this point, see Chapter 2: Nabatchi, T. & Leighninger, M. (2015). *Public participation for 21st century democracy*. Jossey-Bass.

[45] In fact, GFOA was created as part of the Progressive Era reforms of local government.

[46] Putnam, R.D. & Garrett, S.R. (2020). *The upswing: How America came together a century ago and how we can do it again*. Simon & Schuster, New York. We will also note that these reforms were not invented from nothing—they built upon prior traditions in American political and social life.

THE DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR RETHINKING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

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REASONS TO RETHINK:

(Re)Establish Legitimacy of Local Government as an Institution

Today, the legitimacy of government is in question, but legitimacy is required for government to work. An important part of this problem is a loss of public trust in governing institutions.

Align Public Expectations with Realistic Government Goals

Citizens are looking for more from their government than they are getting. The rhetoric of democratic politics has become misaligned with what local governments can actually achieve.

Get Feedback from a Fractured Public

Society has been becoming steadily more individualistic and divided. This means more than ever there is no single "public" that government can get feedback from.

Provide an Alternative to the Politics of Cynicism

A public fractured into impermanent and shifting interest groups cannot provide sustained, coherent solutions to the issues that people are concerned about.

#1 Quality over Quantity

More public engagement is not always better. Pick your spots with public engagement to make the best use of your resources and give citizens the best experience.

#2 Build or Bolster Institutions to Support Public Engagement

High-quality democratic decisions depend on high-quality democratic institutions.

#3 Think of Public Engagement as the Improved Capacity for Sense-Making

Public engagement turns 1) raw data and opinion into 2) quality information, then, into 3) knowledge and mutual understanding, which ultimately can lead to 4) better decisions and collaborative action.

#4 Help the Public Engage with Complexity

Many of the issues that most inspire the passion of citizens are complex problems. Complex problems pose distinct challenges to democratic discourse, but high-quality public engagement can help.

#5 Push back Against the Politics of Cynicism with the Politics of Co-Creation

Public engagement can be designed to promote common understanding and jointly working towards solutions.

#6 Revitalize the "Responsibilities" that go along with "Rights"

Move the citizen from an individual consumer of public services, to part of a team effort to address public problems. Do this by asking how they would solve the problem, instead of just what they want.

#7 Develop Robust Strategies for Dealing with Bad Actors

Design the engagement to minimize the potential for bad actors, like using deliberative engagement methods, small group discussions, and trained facilitators.

#8 Understand the Role of the "Expert" & Play it with Care

The public is less likely than in the past to defer to the expertise of a local government's professional staff. Public engagement must be designed accordingly.

#9 Balance Expert Judgment and Public Engagement to Find the Solutions

Public engagement is not the same as direct democracy. Quality public engagement weaves together inputs from both experts and the public to help public officials reach wise decisions.

#10 Make Public Engagement Work for Elected Officials

Elected officials have a lot to gain from high-quality public engagement, but also face risk when it goes wrong. Work with public officials to co-design public engagement so it works better for them.

RETHINKING BUDGETING

gfoa.org/rethinking-budgeting

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