NATIONAL LEAGUE of CITIES | CENTER FOR RESEARCH & INNOVATION

MAKING LOCAL DEMOCRACY WORK

Municipal Officials' Views About Public Engagement

RESEARCH REPORT

By William Barnes and Bonnie Mann

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PREFACE

Making democracy work and making government work have been core values and central tasks of cities and of the National League of Cities (NLC) since its founding in 1924. NLC is carrying out work to assist cities and city officials on a range of topic areas, such as affordable housing, fiscal conditions, economic development, immigrant integration and sustainability. The questions of engaging citizens on issues and creating effective public deliberation arise in these and virtually all areas of municipal concern.

In the summer of 2009, NLC conducted a survey of municipal officials, both elected and managerial, to find out more about their views, attitudes and local practices in public engagement. The results are detailed in this report, "Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Officials Views About Public Engagement."

The survey yielded a wealth of information about the ways city officials understand and approach public engagement. In addition, the authors, NLC staff members William Barnes and Bonnie Mann, offer their insights and propose questions for further research.

While every city has a unique history and culture and often faces distinct challenges and opportunities, we intend that the findings presented from this research will assist municipal officials in developing strategies to tailor specific approaches and practices for their community. We believe that when municipal officials engage the public in decision making, it develops a stronger sense of community and leads to better policy outcomes.

NLC will draw upon the findings from this research as a basis to present information and provide educational opportunities to assist municipals officials in their efforts to strengthen local democracy.

This work was supported financially by a grant to the National League of Cities Institute by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. We also benefited from a learning contract with the Kettering Foundation. We greatly appreciate the support of both institutions.

We join the authors in thanking the elected and management city officials who responded to the survey.

The authors also thank NLC colleagues, Christiana McFarland and Lara Malakoff for their assistance in developing this report. They appreciate the advice provided by the municipal officials who serve on NLC's City Futures Panel on Democratic Governance; Matt Leighninger (Deliberative Democracy Consortium); Terry Amsler (Institute for Local Government); and Will Friedman (Public Agenda). And they are especially grateful to William Woodwell for his intelligence, collegiality and editorial assistance.

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HIGHLIGHTS

In June 2009, NLC surveyed elected and managerial municipal officials regarding public engagement — "proactive efforts to involve people in deliberating public issues and in helping to solve public problems." The report presents the findings, offers analysis and suggests further research opportunities. Here are a few highlights from the findings.

There are regular and various public engagement processes occurring in cities.

- Municipal officials report that their municipalities use public engagement processes often (60 percent) or sometimes (21 percent).

- They report use of a range and variety of local practices. Some of the venues include town hall meetings, neighborhood councils, online forums and community surveys.

Local officials value public engagement from all members of the community.

- Virtually all the respondents (95 percent) report that public officials in their city value public engagement processes. They see important benefits such as developing a stronger sense of community, building trust between the public and city hall and finding better solutions to local problems.

- The report observes that it takes the efforts of the whole community to create and sustain effective democratic governance. Many municipal officials say that important players (including citizens, the media, community and special interest groups and their own city halls) are not stepping up to their proper roles.

Municipal officials say that both they and the public need more training for engagement processes.

- Municipal officials and residents need skills to engage better. Nearly half of the respondents said that neither municipal officials nor residents have the skills, training and experience to carry out and participate in effective public engagement. The report suggests that improving skills may therefore be at least as important as providing technology and/or varied processes for engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

"[Public Engagement] ... means to me creating an environment where citizens see themselves as part owners of the city as opposed to simply being served by the city. ... We want people to see that we're all part of this together and that there's ownership and there's some obligation. We're trying to move beyond simply entitlements into obligation to contribute to your city and its health and to be a part of the conversation and to make it part of the culture that we work on issues through conversations."

– Mark Linder, Director, Parks and Recreation, Cupertino, Calif.

We undertook this study in order to better understand the attitudes, knowledge and underlying assumptions of municipal officials, both elected and appointed, about democracy and the functions of municipal government. More specifically, this study is about "public engagement." The survey questionnaire that was used to obtain the findings defined public engagement processes as "proactive efforts to involve people in deliberating public issues and in helping to solve public problems."

We offer this report to municipal officials, to citizens of the nation's cities and towns and to people who labor in the fields of democratic governance in order to inform and assist their work. To the extent that it is desirable to either support or seek to alter local officials' views on these topics or to provide them with better information, it is necessary to know more about the current state of those views and officials' levels of knowledge.

This empirical study emerges from our own normative framework. We are advocates for public engagement and for making local democracy work. We believe that good information and analysis will serve these ends. We sought answers and findings that would allow us to better understand what municipal officials think and believe about the topic so that we and others can do a better job of helping citizens and municipal officials alike make democracy work.

Of course, the topic of democratic governance is broader than the question of people's relationship with their municipal government. Besides municipalities, there are also other governments that people engage with. Most importantly, there are many ways that people come together, independent of government, to address problems and seize opportunities; in other words, democracy is not always about engaging with government. It is thus important to remember that this study focuses on a subset — public engagement with municipal governments — of the much broader topic of democratic governance. Public engagement is part of that larger pattern of political institutions, practices and culture. It is not a separate thing, and it is not the only thing that matters.

About The Project

In the democracy fields, the empirical research literature on the government side of government/citizen engagement is rather sparse. There are many excellent resources of the "how-to" sort, and also many anecdotes and case studies of specific public engagement activities and methods. There is also much energetic theory and conceptual work. The analytic, advocacy and opinion literature on this subject is relatively stronger on "shoulds" and "oughts" about what municipal government does and doesn't do and why. In contrast, it is relatively weaker when it comes to exploring what is actually going on and assessing governmental participants' motivations, knowledge levels and rationales.

So, this study is an initial foray to correct this imbalance, to broaden the framework and to study governments' participation in these activities in a more objective or clinical fashion, without judgmental blinders. One goal of this report is to stimulate a research agenda that will explore governmental roles, deficiencies, strengths and opportunities regarding public engagement. We hope that the field might create a somewhat different discourse on this topic, a more constructive, less blaming conversation about "government" that might lead to better outcomes for local communities, their residents and their municipal leaders.

We intend for this study to contribute to the overall knowledge in the field. More specifically, we want to encourage more empirical and analytic work about the municipal government aspect of government/citizen engagement. We believe this is an important part of what is happening in the field. The role of municipal government in public engagement deserves more considered and careful attention in order to enrich the field and to make research and practice more relevant and effective. The data and findings of our study are not definitive; they do, however, suggest potentially significant insights and directions for further work. We invite comments and additional relevant information from readers.

A Few Opening Observations

As we worked on developing our questionnaire and, later, on analyzing the responses, some observations and questions emerged that in turn shaped our approaches to findings. The following points do not constitute a summary or highlights of the data. Rather, we offer them as observations and questions that the reader might use to illuminate the presentations of data and findings in the pages that follow.

Place matters … and places are different. Generalizations about municipal and other roles in public engagement — including any made in this report — must be offered gingerly and applied with care. Local institutions, activities, leadership and political culture will shape the context and conditions for government/citizen engagement. For any given city or town, the presenting question is whether a generalization is relevant and, if so, how.

Public engagement can mean different things to different people. Does it include only large-scale processes that involve large numbers of people and diverse populations? Does it include citizens serving on a board or commission? Coming at the topic from their institutional base and experience, municipal officials seem to be saying yes and yes — and yes some more. As described in Chapter 2, officials tend to include a wide range of activities under the umbrella of public engagement. The survey questionnaire that was used to obtain this report's findings defined public engagement processes as "proactive efforts to involve people in deliberating public issues and in helping to solve public problems."

Greater clarity about definitions and more attention to the views held by various participants would be useful.

It takes a village to do effective public engagement. It takes a whole community to create and sustain an effective democratic governance culture. Many municipal officials report that important players (including their own City Halls) are not stepping up to their proper roles. The opportunity for the field might be to recast the topic in terms

of roles and responsibilities for everyone and thus to lift up public engagement as a core responsibility for municipal government, citizens, organizations, the media, etc.

Municipal officials and other stakeholders have different ideas about what makes public engagement effective. Given various definitions, it would not be surprising to find various ideas about what makes for effectiveness in this work. Local officials, for example, say it is most important that people have the right information and that the discussion is civil. This might contrast with criteria that others identify. A challenge for the field may be to try to build consensus around what effectiveness in public engagement means; this would be a less abstract way of getting at shared definitions and goals.

Municipal officials are ambivalent on this topic. As described in Chapter 3, many municipal officials express satisfaction with their *local* public engagement, while other NLC research indicates they take a dim view of engagement nationally and in other communities besides their own. A question for the field is how to understand this "local satisfaction." Chapter 3 provides information from the 2009 survey, including data suggesting that officials see and understand some of the deficiencies of their local public engagement activities. They also identify a range of barriers to effective public engagement. Helping officials find ways to overcome those barriers can contribute to improved public engagement practice at the local level.

Municipal officials and residents need skills to do this work well. One of the key insights coming out of the 2009 survey is that skills matter. Nearly half of respondents said that neither municipal officials nor residents have the skills and experience to carry out and participate in effective public engagement. Improving skills may therefore be at least as important as providing new or sophisticated techniques that are operated by others.

Methodology and Chapter Topics

This NLC State of America's Cities survey was sent to a random sample of municipal officials, both elected and appointed, in 1,748 cities across the nation in June 2009. Results are drawn from 313 responses, for a response rate of 18 percent. With this response rate, it can be expected with a 95 percent degree of confidence (i.e., in 95 out of 100 random sample surveys) that the answers to the survey questions would be within 5 percentage points, plus or minus. Thus, in reading the findings, differences of 10 percentage points are needed to identify significant difference.

The response rate limits the reliability of cross tabulations (for example, looking for variations by region or gender) because the resulting cells would be too small to support meaningful analysis. We have, for the most part, eschewed such analyses. About half of the responses came from elected officials and about half from managerial officials. We did look at the responses from these two groups. Although the response rate does not allow us to be definitive, it appears that — except where noted in the text — the answers to the survey from elected and non-elected municipal officials do not vary significantly.

Responses by population size are provided on the next page.

ABOUT THE SURVEY			
Population	Number of Surveys Sent	Number Returned	Response Rate
> 300,000	47	10	21%
100,000 - 299,000	141	33	23%
50,000 - 99,999	278	52	19%
25,000 - 49,999	486	92	19%
< 25,000	796	126	16%

The chapters that follow present the data from the survey and offer analyses and interpretations. We also have included throughout the document various quotations from interviews that we recently conducted with city officials on these topics.

Chapter 2 focuses on what municipal officials (we use that term throughout to refer to both elected and appointed officials) said about the public engagement activities in their cities. In Chapter 3, the topic shifts to officials' assessments of those activities. Chapter 4 presents municipal officials' views about the roles of the various "stakeholders" in local democracies. The final chapter gathers some further reflections, especially about directions for research and for re-framing deliberation about making local democracy work.

WHAT MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS AND CITY HALLS ARE DOING

Frequency of Public Engagement

The 2009 NLC survey found that most cities are engaged in local efforts to involve people in deliberating issues and helping to solve problems. Eighty-one percent of respondents reported that their municipalities use public engagement processes often (60 percent) or sometimes (21 percent). In addition, 85 percent of officials reported that their municipalities do more public engagement than is required by federal, state, or local laws (See Figure 1).

While these are very large majorities, about one in five officials (19 percent) report that public engagement processes are used only occasionally or rarely, and 15 percent report that their city does only what is legally required.

The rest of this report will suggest more complex and thought-provoking dimensions of this topic than these straightforward findings about the quantity of public engagement reported by local officials.

Types of Public Engagement

The survey presented officials with a list of various public engagement processes and activities and asked which are regularly used in respondents' cities. Our intent was not to offer an exhaustive roster of items that could be construed as public engagement, but rather to provide examples along a spectrum of activities that require varying levels of investment and deliberative resident involvement. The survey results therefore do not present a comprehensive catalog of what cities are doing. Rather, they provide useful insights into municipal tendencies and patterns in this work.

Solid majorities of municipal officials report regular use of online tools (including the City Hall website and online publication of council agendas and proposed executive actions) to support and encourage public engagement. However, most municipalities do not appear to have embraced "Web 2.0" strategies in significant numbers as of yet, with just 14 percent of officials reporting that their cities regularly use interactive online forums (See Figure 2).

Notably, two-thirds of officials (67 percent) reported that their city regularly uses special deliberative processes such as "town hall" meetings to involve large numbers of people on critical issues.

Nineteen percent of respondents wrote in additional activities that are part of their local public engagement efforts. Examples of these include:

- E-mail to residents;
- "Teletown hall" meetings;
- "Community Insight Team" of people selected at random for feedback;
- Resident surveys;
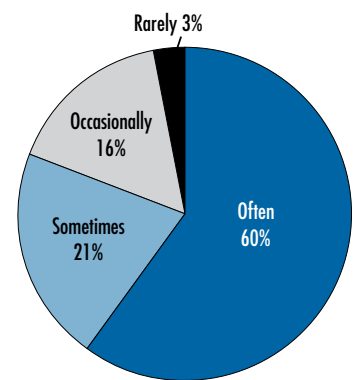- "Meet the Mayor" bi-weekly;
- Social networking like Facebook;

Figure 1: How frequently are public engagement processes used?

• Public access channel; and

• Weekly "listening post" with public officials at town's Saturday farmers' market.

The survey results indicate that local officials tend to include a wide range of activities under the umbrella of "public engagement." This should be viewed as good news in the democratic governance fields. To the extent that municipal officials define many activities as intentional public engagement processes, it opens up a conversation for officials and for those working to advance democratic practices about how to ensure that the full range of these activities result in genuine involvement of the public in the process of governance.

TOOLS REGULARLY USED TO SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT	Percentage
Accessible city hall website, including email addresses for all city officials	92%
Council agendas and proposed executive actions published on-line well in advance and comments invited	86%
Special deliberative processes, for example "town hall" meetings, used to involve large numbers of people on critical issues	67%
Staff and funding assigned for facilitating public engagement	51%
Neighborhood structures in place for community engagement	44%
A specific plan for public engagement in your city	28%
Interactive on-line forums	14%
Other	19%

Figure 2: Please indicate which of the following are regularly used in your municipality to support and encourage public engagement

This is a significant opportunity. If municipal officials (and perhaps local residents) see public engagement as a mere "add-on" to activities that are already happening in their cities, then they are more likely to find reasons (e.g., lack of time and resources) not to do this work. On the other hand, if they can see that they are already doing many of these things, and that there are ways to make them more effective, then the odds of improving public engagement become much better.

The survey's findings concerning the extent to which these processes are used suggests that the main issue around public engagement in most cities is not quantitative; most officials see their city doing this already. Rather, the opportunity for improvement may be qualitative — to make the processes work better. There will still be obstacles, of course, but these should be easier to overcome when municipalities are challenged to improve on current work rather than taking on work that is entirely new.

"Public engagement means to me more than just me speaking to the citizens from our regular council meetings. … It means having roundtable discussions, small and large group forums for us to hear both sides of the [problems] and the solution. … Engagement is just another form of communication. … [W]e need to effectively communicate with one another."

– Cynthia Stamps-Jones, Councilmember, Riverdale, Ga.

The survey also provides clues about the degree to which public engagement efforts are embedded in city practices. For example, half of officials (51 percent) said their cities assign staff and funding for facilitating public engagement; 44 percent said neighborhood structures are in place for community engagement.

In addition, three in 10 respondents (28 percent) said their municipalities have a specific plan for public engagement. This is a significant subset of cities. Whatever they are doing in the name of public engagement, it appears that this 28 percent of cities are guided in their work by a plan that municipal officials presumably have debated and approved. This shows a high level of commitment to embedding public engagement in the work of these cities. Looking ahead, we believe it would be worthwhile to explore in more detail exactly what these plans entail and the lessons they may hold for other cities as they consider developing plans of their own.

The Topics of Engagement

Of course, the degree to which municipalities seek to engage the public depends on a variety of factors, including the nature of the challenges cities are facing at any given time. The 2009 survey bears this out with data suggesting that there has been a notable increase in municipal public engagement in recent months because of the effects of the economic recession on city budgets.

About one-third of municipal officials (35 percent) said their city has done more in the past year to engage residents in budgeting and finance processes than it usually does. Only 2 percent said their city has done less.

NLC's research on city fiscal conditions indicates that the budget challenges facing cities will continue in the months and years ahead. This suggests that the need to engage the public in making difficult choices about revenues and spending may also continue.

> *"As cities right now, we have to be really careful about the decisions we make because we do not have either the time or the money to misstep. … So if the public can own that issue and the problem in the beginning and the solution at the end, it makes the decision much more sustainable."*
>
> — Robin Beltramini, Councilmember, Troy, Mich.

When asked how likely their city is to set up some sort of deliberative public engagement process to address specific issues, three out of four officials (76 percent) said they were very likely or likely to do so on budget issues. The other issues considered among the top five candidates for public engagement by city officials were: zoning/land use (82 percent selected very likely or likely); downtown development (78 percent); neighborhood planning (76 percent); and public safety (71 percent).

If we look at the intensity of municipal officials' responses — that is, just weighing the "very likely" responses — the same items round out the top five in almost exactly the same order (with budgets moving up the list to tie with downtown development for second place). This shows remarkable consistency in the issues that municipal officials believe are ripe for addressing via public engagement processes (See Figure 3).

Each of these top five issues falls into the category of what might be viewed as classic responsibilities of government — e.g., balancing budgets, protecting the public, regulating development and land use, etc. They also tend to be issues where local officials presumably can see reaching consensus among themselves and with the public on key policies and decisions. That doesn't mean they think it will be easy. We can presume that municipal officials' experience with these issues indicates to them that they can work with their colleagues and the public to solve these problems and chart a path for-

ward for their cities and towns. Many communities probably have relatively routine, time-tested ways of engaging the public on these topics.

Of course, the responses to this question do not tell us about the types or the quality of processes cities have established to get residents involved in addressing the issues in question. But we can make an educated guess, based on other responses in the survey, that municipal officials see this work in fairly broad terms; these activities presumably could fall anywhere along the spectrum from one-way communications about the issues via the City Hall website to town hall meetings, resident surveys and more.
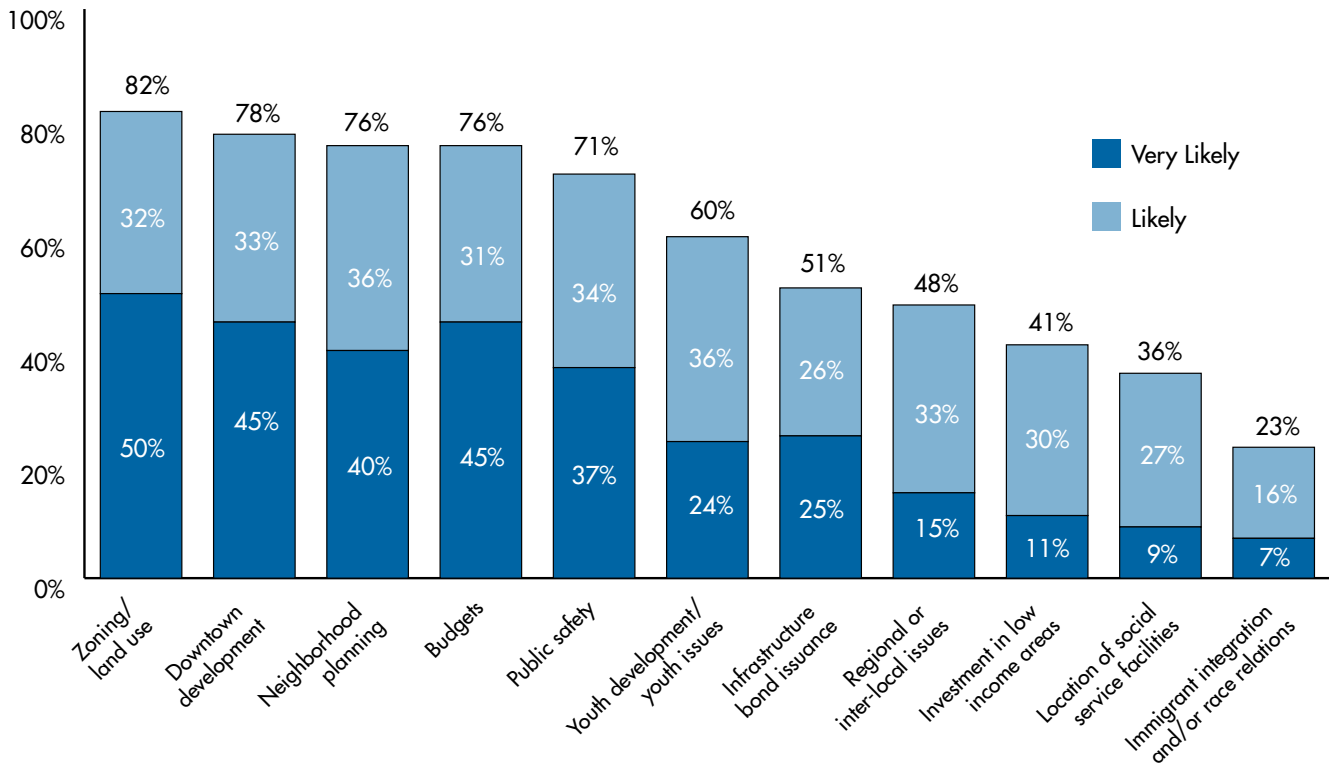

Figure 3: Below is a list of important topics on which municipal decisions often need to be made. For reach, please indicate how likely your city government is to set up some sort of deliberative process to engage the public in addressing the issue.

"We just completed a master plan for 900 acres of land. … That's the last land that we have for development. And it took a one-and-a-half-year public engagement process to do it. We basically engaged all the citizens in the city, plus all the commissions (transportation, planning, parks and services, utilities) and business groups and others. And so at the end of this, we had a wonderful plan that's laid out for next 20 years … and we know what resources we need."

– Conrad Lee, Deputy Mayor, Bellevue, Wash.

In contrast to those issues that more than seven of 10 city officials select as likely or very likely candidates for public engagement, it is interesting to review some of the issues that officials say their cities are less likely to use as foci for this work. For example, only 23 percent of officials said they were very likely (7 percent) or likely (16 percent) to set up a deliberative government process to address immigrant integration and/or race relations. Similarly, 41 percent said they were very likely (11 percent) or likely (30 percent) to use such a process to address investment in low-income areas.

Why local officials might view these topics as less ripe for municipally stimulated public engagement is an open question, and an important one. If good public engagement might be useful on these issues, better understanding of what prevents municipal governments from taking that role would be a useful first step toward addressing the operating obstacles.

For the time being, some potential explanations can be offered. First, these can be difficult issues for communities to wrestle with — they can create division and controversy and/or elicit expressions of racism, classism, anti-immigrant feelings, or other forms of bias. Local officials may simply be reporting that their City Hall is likely to want to avoid dealing with these issues in a highly public way.

A second possible explanation is that some local officials do not see themselves as the appropriate conveners for discussions of these types of topics. They may want or expect a seat at the table, but they may see civic or nonprofit organizations (or even the national government in the case of immigration) as a better fit for the role of leading public engagement on these topics. This view goes to the question of the proper roles of government, specifically municipal government, on a given topic.

A third possible explanation is simpler: some cities rarely face certain questions. Thus, for example, a city may not have experienced any in-migration by people from other countries, and thus the "immigrant integration" topic has not presented itself.

The Effects of the 2008 Election on Engagement

In addition to the effects of recession, another factor in what the survey suggests was an increase in local public engagement in 2009 is the impact of the 2008 presidential campaign. The survey, which was conducted in June 2009, found nearly three in 10 officials (28 percent) connecting the 2008 election, which saw significant increases in voter participation (especially among Hispanic, African American and young voters), to an increase in public engagement in local public affairs.

Of course, the long-term effects of this uptick in citizen engagement remain to be seen — but if the recent healthcare debate and the rise of the "tea party" movement are any indication, significant numbers of Americans are eager to have their opinions heard in ongoing policy discussions at all levels of government. Whether this becomes a positive force for effective governance is an open question.

MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS' ASSESSMENTS OF LOCAL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE

In addition to exploring the level of public engagement in municipalities and what cities are doing, the NLC survey was designed to find out more about how municipal officials think about what's happening in their cities to involve residents in deliberating issues and helping to solve problems.

Significant majorities of municipal officials say they are satisfied with what's happening and believe that public engagement produces useful results. However, a sizeable minority expresses dissatisfaction with the public engagement *status quo*, and many officials cite a range of obstacles that can stand in the way of effective engagement in their cities and towns.

Officials' Overall Satisfaction with Engagement

Most public officials (57 percent) said they are satisfied with the level and nature of public engagement in their cities, but only 15 percent said they are very satisfied (See Figure 4). In answer to a separate question, an overwhelming majority of respondents (96 percent) said they had participated in or seen an effective public engagement process. We take this to mean that respondents believe they are acquainted with a standard of effectiveness by which to make these sorts of judgments.

> *"I think we had pretty much a closed [process] eight years ago and it was really important to the citizens and to the leaders to open that up. … People aren't comfortable going to City Hall, so you have to kind of take away the fear."*
>
> – Susan Narvaiz, Mayor, San Marcos, Texas

Other research by NLC in recent years suggests that, while local officials may be generally positive about what is happening in their cities to engage the public, they are less sanguine about the state of public engagement in other places. In NLC's June 2007 "State of America's Cities" survey, 58 percent of elected city officials said the lack of trust and degree of disengagement between residents and government is a big problem in the nation generally. This contrast between municipal officials' assessment of public engagement in their cities as compared to elsewhere brings to mind public opinion surveys that regularly reveal Americans to be generally happy with their representatives in Congress but disdainful of Congress as a whole.

All of this said, there are still a significant number of municipal officials who view local public engagement in a more negative light. Nearly three in 10 municipal officials (28 percent) are either dissatisfied (25 percent) or very dissatisfied (3 percent) with the level and nature of public engagement in their cities.

The findings reported in the remainder of this report will exhibit the complexities behind these overall judgments. The implicit acknowledgment by a significant percentage of municipal officials that their cities can do better on these issues presents an important opportunity for the field of democratic governance to help these local
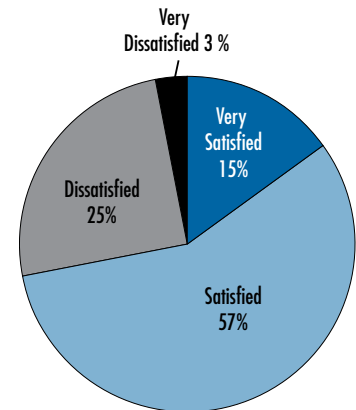
Figure 4: In general, how satisfied are you with the level and nature of public engagement in your city?

leaders chart a course to improved public engagement. Even the 57 percent of officials who are merely satisfied with local processes would presumably be receptive to improvement in this area.

> *"I'm not as satisfied as I would like to be although we try and engage people's comments. It seems we get to a core group of individuals for comments and are not getting members from the entire city involved. I find that to be slightly lacking in that we really need to go out and spend more time engaging people on all sides of the city."*
>
> – Don Rosen, Commissioner, Sunrise, Fla.

The Value of Engagement

Regardless of whether they are satisfied or not with what's happening in their cities and towns to engage the public, municipal officials believe these processes are important to their colleagues and local residents (See Figure 5).

When asked to what extent public engagement processes are valued by public officials, 95 percent of respondents answered "to a great extent" (58 percent) or "somewhat" (37 percent). Only 5 percent selected "very little." This finding indicates that survey respondents believe that they and their colleagues in government think that getting resident input and involvement is a net plus for their cities.
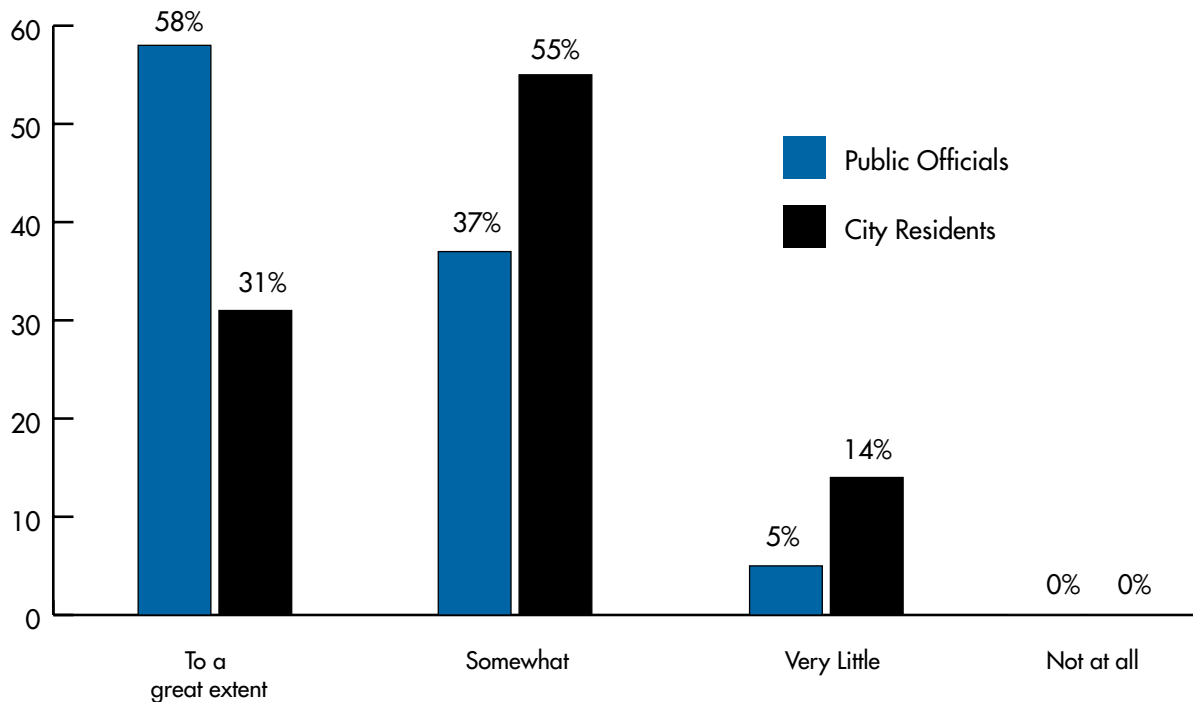
Figure 5: To what extent are these [public engagement] processes valued?

Similarly, 86 percent of officials said that public engagement processes are valued by a city's residents either to a great extent (31 percent) or somewhat (55 percent). It is worth noting the divergence in the percentages of respondents selecting "to a great extent" and "somewhat" in answers to this question, when compared to the data from the question about whether public officials value these processes. While 58 percent

of respondents said public officials value these processes to a great extent, the figure dropped to 31 percent when respondents were asked about the feelings of the general public. This discrepancy may help explain some of the ambivalence that municipal officials express about this topic. It may also suggest an opportunity for the field to help municipalities explore ways to reframe public engagement in ways that could potentially result in changed perceptions among city officials as to greater buy-in and support for these processes among local residents.

> *"We're elected to try to enact what the community values represent. The only way to really know that is to have them involved, engaged in articulating those values whether it be very broad thinking like visioning or whether it be complaining about a noise issue in their neighborhood. In either event, people need to understand that they're in control of their government and that's what public engagement's all about in my mind."*
>
> — Lou Ogden, Mayor, Tualatin, Ore.

Judging the Usefulness of Engagement

The 2009 NLC survey did not ask respondents specifically why they perceive public engagement as something that is valued by residents and public officials. But the survey results provide some clues. The biggest of these comes in respondents' answers about whether engagement produces useful results for cities and municipal government.

Thirty-eight percent of officials said public engagement processes produce useful results often; 53 percent said they produce useful results sometimes (See Figure 6). Their sense that these efforts have some usefulness could be a positive factor to build upon. Less than one in 10 said "rarely" (8 percent) or "never" (1 percent).

But how do municipal officials define a useful result? Presumably, the answer has a lot to do with their views about what kinds of things make deliberative public engagement effective. For example, a public meeting could be judged ineffective and could produce results that are not useful to the extent that it turns into a nasty shouting match rather than a deliberative discussion with a clearly defined goal.

The NLC survey asked local officials to rate the degree of importance they place on each item on a list of factors contributing to the effectiveness of public engagement activities and processes. This question asks about public engagement generically. Given the variation, noted above, in how city officials view the propensity to engage the public on different topics, we could expect that answers to this "effectiveness" question would also vary by topic and by situation. Exploring that hypothesis would be a useful opportunity for further research.

In analyzing their responses, we have focused on the percentage of respondents identifying a particular factor as either 1) very important or 2) somewhat important or not important. This approach captures intensity of the assessment and makes "important" the middle term. (See Figure 7.)

What do we see when we look at the data in this way? The three factors that the most respondents rated as very important have to do with the quality of the information the public receives and the overall civility of the discussion. These top three responses were:
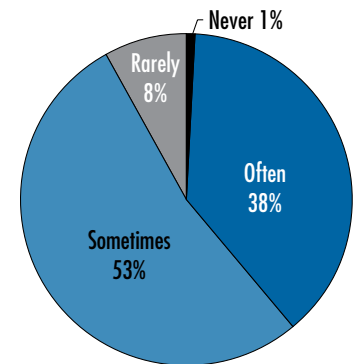
Figure 6: How frequently do your municipality's public engagement processes produce useful outcomes?

- Discussion is civil (78 percent);
- Public receives useful, balanced information about the subject (76 percent); and
- People who can answer questions are in the room (73 percent).

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Discussion is civil	78%	21%	1%	0%
Public receives useful, balanced information about the subject	76%	23%	1%	0%
People who can answer questions are in the room	73%	24%	2%	0%
Diverse participants; not just "the usual' people	59%	34%	7%	0%
Process is not a gripe session; productive	57%	36%	6%	1%
Everyone who wants to has a chance to ask a question and/ express an opinion	56%	35%	8%	1%
People do not expect government to solve all the problems	47%	39%	11%	4%
People listen to each other and some even change their views based on the discussion	47%	45%	7%	1%
People try to address the issue at hand	46%	50%	4%	0%
New allies are created for addressing problems	39%	43%	15%	3%
Most participants are positive in their assessment of the process	28%	56%	14%	2%
Large numbers participate	17%	44%	34%	5%
People accept my ideas on a subject	6%	24%	40%	31%

Figure 7: How important are each of the following factors in contributing to the effectiveness of deliberative public engagement processes?

In a separate question asking which three of this same list of factors are considered most important to the effectiveness of a deliberative public engagement process, by far the most frequently selected item was "public receives useful, balanced information about the subject." This factor was identified as most important by 78 percent of municipal officials; the next closest response ("People who can answer questions are in the room") was selected by just 35 percent and would seem to reflect a similar concern about information.

One implication of these findings is that municipal officials place a clear premium on what they see as reliable, factual information as the foundation for effective public engagement. In other words, a central issue for officials is that public discussion should work from basic information about whatever situation is under consideration. This orientation would contrast with ones that focus on how people feel or on alternative information and priorities.

This finding presents us with another important question: which "facts" are the relevant and correct ones? This is an issue that requires unpacking. If large numbers of municipal officials are entering the realm of public engagement with an information orientation, then this suggests that they come to this work with an entire framework that shapes how the topic at hand is to be considered, including which data are apt and which processes are required in order to make legitimate decisions. Large percentages of municipal officials apparently worry that residents do not *already* have the right information and the right framework they need in order to participate effectively

in these processes. At the very least, seeing public engagement primarily as an opportunity for public *education* on the issues suggests that many municipal officials may view these processes through a different frame than the people they represent.

We can see this view of engagement as an outgrowth of the rise of professionalism in local government over the 20th century. John Nalbandian, a prominent scholar of public administration and a former elected municipal official, reported in 2005 that "contemporary local government professionals work amid the conflicting forces of administrative modernization and civic engagement."[1] To the extent that they rely on the administrative modernization side of things, municipal officials will prefer that public engagement be guided by information and frameworks that are derived from professional standards and institutional procedures. Citizens who do not share these orientations may tend to come at the issues differently. This is not a right vs. wrong or correct vs. incorrect issue, but it does point to the significance of frameworks that underlie potential conflicts.

We might think that officials and citizens alike also will prefer that the conversation spurred by public engagement processes remain orderly, focused and respectful of all participants. In the NLC survey, the item that was most frequently rated as very important to the effectiveness of these processes is "discussion is civil" (78 percent). And indeed, a second cluster of factors most frequently identified by municipal officials as very important connects the effectiveness of public engagement to the characteristics of that conversation. These responses are:

- Discussion is civil (78 percent);
- Diverse participants; not just "the usual" people (59 percent);
- Process is not a gripe session; productive (57 percent);
- Everyone who wants to has a chance to ask a question and/or express an opinion (56 percent);
- People listen to each other and some even change their views based on the discussion (47 percent);
- Most participants are positive in their assessment of the process (28 percent); and
- Large numbers participate (17 percent).

Just 17 percent of municipal officials considered the fact that large numbers participate to be very important to the effectiveness of deliberative public engagement. In another question on the survey, officials were asked how frequently their municipalities' public engagement processes involved large and diverse numbers of people. The response: just slightly more than one in four (27 percent) selected "often," with a significant majority (61 percent) selecting "sometimes" (40 percent) or "occasionally" (21 percent).

A third set of factors in the list of possible responses to the effectiveness question are focused on problem-solving. Those factors and the percentage of officials who said each is very important are as follows:

- Process is not a gripe session; productive (57 percent);
- People do not expect government to solve all the problems (47 percent);
- People try to address this issue at hand (46 percent);
- New allies are created for addressing this problem (39 percent); and
- People accept my ideas on a subject (6 percent).

None of these factors shows up among the top three very important selections. Only one of these was selected by a majority of respondents. Comparing this data and discussion with the findings regarding "rewards and benefits" in Figure 11 would seem to be a potentially fruitful line for further research in search of deeper and more precise understandings of what municipal officials find useful about public engagement.

While reviewing all of this data, we wondered whether there would be any difference in the judgment of elected vs. non-elected municipal officials on the question of what factors are most important to the effectiveness of public engagement processes. The cross tabulations, while not statistically reliable given the size of the responding population, may be suggestive. It appears that elected and management officials think very much alike on this question. The cross tabulations turned up only one major difference. Elected officials were more likely than managerial respondents to select the following as one of the three most important factors: "Everyone who wants has a chance to ask a question and/or express an opinion." Perhaps this difference stems from elected officials ultimately having to answer more directly to the public; they are apparently more frequently concerned about ensuring that the process doesn't shut anybody out.

> "What [public engagement] means to me is that we get to get the voice of the people. … It's not the city's agenda that we're promoting, but it's the people's agenda."
> – Rodney Locks, Councilmember, Brevard, N.C.

Obstacles and Risks

The NLC survey asked municipal officials to consider the obstacles to and risks of greater levels of public engagement. Respondents were presented with a list of 17 potential obstacles and risks and asked to select all that apply (See Figure 8).

Figure 8: What do you think are the obstacles to and risks of greater levels of public engagement in deliberating public issues and in helping to solve public problems?

OBSTACLES OR RISKS	Percentage
Makes people too powerful in relation to government officials	2%
I was elected to lead, not follow	5%
Language barriers are too troublesome and/or translation is too costly	8%
Staff are not supportive	8%
Elected leaders are not supportive	9%
Leaders of powerful groups outside City Hall are opposed to getting more people more directly involved	10%
Diverse populations are hard to communicate with	11%
Legal or state rules and restrictions	12%
It is uncomfortable/takes public officials and municipal staff out of their comfort zone	13%
Lack of clear results makes it not worthwhile	13%
Cannot know who actually represents the community	15%
Lack of experience, skills, know-how	18%
Adds too much time to the decision making process	20%
Costs are too high in money and staff time	30%
Youth and other segments of the community are hard to reach	36%
Media not paying attention and/or is not fair and balanced	39%
Public apathy and/or ambivalence	69%

Far and away, the most frequently selected item was "public apathy and/or ambivalence," chosen by 69 percent of municipal officials. No other item was chosen by more than 40 percent of respondents. What's more, when asked to identify three of the 17 obstacles that are the most difficult to overcome, public apathy and/or ambivalence topped the rest of the list. It was selected by 58 percent of respondents; the next closest response was selected by 20 percent.

The second and third most frequently selected obstacles to and risks of public engagement were: "media are not paying attention and/or is not fair and balanced" (chosen by 39 percent of officials); and "youth and other segments of the community are hard to reach" (36 percent).

Interestingly, these top three responses to the "risks and obstacles" question all get at the responsibilities of *other participants,* outside of government, in the process of deliberating public issues and helping to solve public problems. (For more on the roles of the public, the media and others, see Chapter 4.)

> *"I think your risk is if it's not well structured, well facilitated and well organized with some clear ideas of what you want to achieve in mind, you run the risk of having it be a dysfunctional process that people will not want to repeat. They will not want to come back."*
>
> – Mark Linder, Director, Parks and Recreation, Cupertino, Calif.

By contrast, obstacles and risks having to do with government actors were selected very infrequently. For example, "staff are not supportive" and "elected leaders are not supportive" were chosen as obstacles or risks by only 8 percent and 9 percent of respondents, respectively. Similarly, just 13 percent selected, "It is uncomfortable/takes public officials and municipal staff out of their comfort zone."

A separate survey question reflects similar outlooks. Two out of three officials (69 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that city officials would do more and better engagement if citizens did a better job of making constructive use of participation opportunities. In contrast, 45 percent agreed or strongly agreed that more people would participate, and would participate more effectively, if City Hall did a better job of making participation opportunities readily available and accessible. (See Figure 9: Level of agreement with various statements.)

Figure 9: Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Most people really care about the whole community and are willing to help solve local problems.	9%	60%	29%	2%
Public engagement processes typically attract mostly the same people who complain or promote their favorite solutions.	24%	57%	19%	0%
Most people would participate more, and more effectively, if municipal government did a better job of making participation opportunities readily available and accessible.	9%	36%	51%	4%
Most city officials would make the efforts to engage residents in public issues, and would do it more effectively, if citizens did a better job of making constructive use of participation opportunities.	10%	58%	30%	2%
Except in an emergency or when something affects them specifically, most people will not contribute to or participate in local problem-solving.	25%	49%	24%	2%

"[Public engagement] does take a commitment by staff. It takes a commitment by the city council to make staff available to help support or at least respond or at least respect these organizations … because I guess the risk would be to empower people and give them expectations and then not be able to follow through and deliver. That's a recipe for catastrophe."
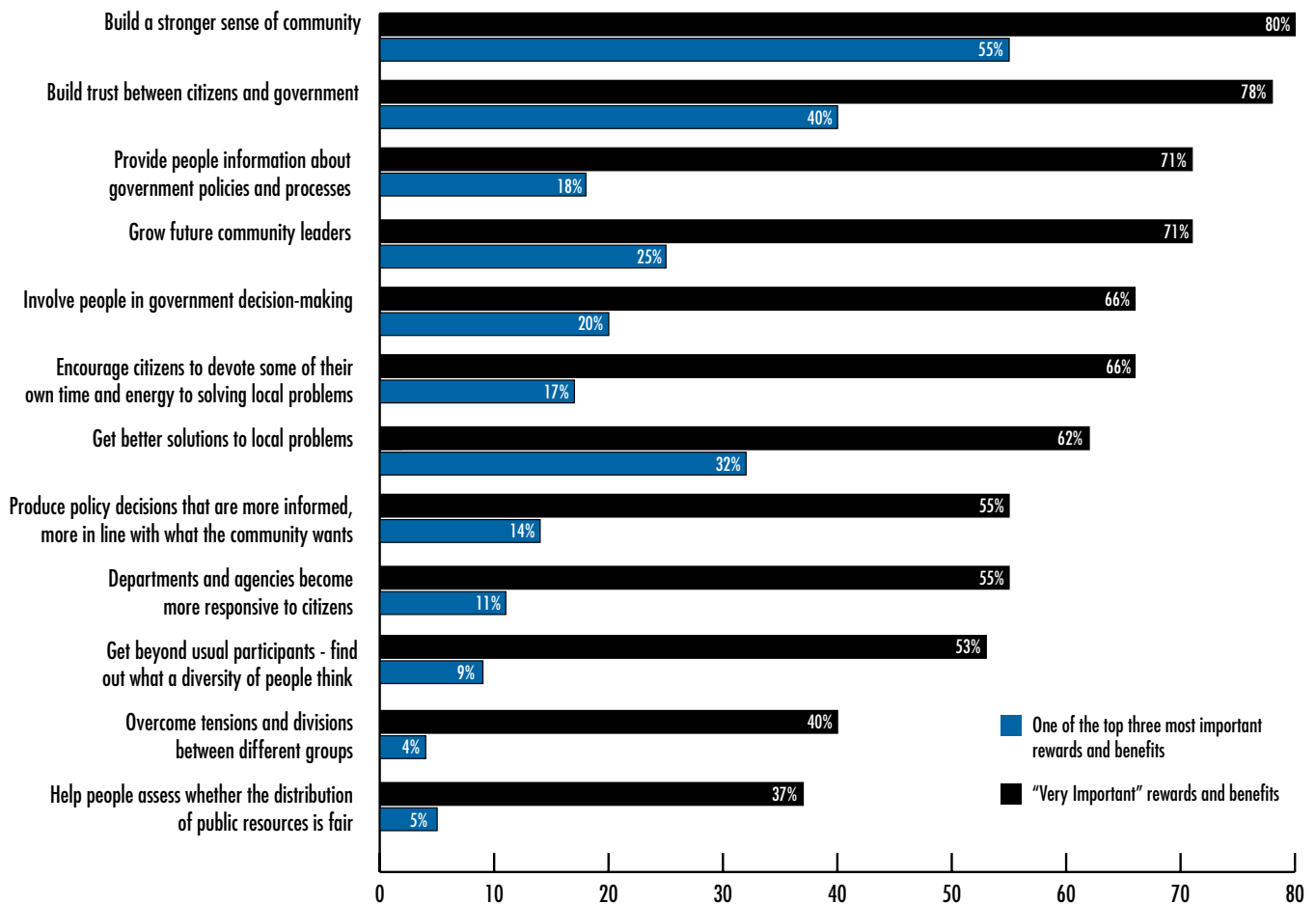
– Lou Ogden, Mayor, Tualatin, Ore.

The swing of 24 percentage points between the two statements is significant. Here are the makings of a standoff, a quandary, a dilemma. Which set of actors do municipal officials think should, could, or will take the first step? Nearly half (45 percent) put the burden on City Hall. That would seem to be a cadre sufficient to make a difference. Overcoming this deadlock would seem to be a challenge for what one would call political or civic leadership.

Figure 10: What do you think are the rewards and benefits of greater levels of public engagement in deliberating public issues and in helping to solve public problems? Which rewards and benefits are the most important to your city?

"We make democracy, it's messy. The governmental process is tedious. But that's the nature of it. And if you want to do something quickly, you cannot do that. And that's the nature of democracy. … You may discover things that you don't anticipate, you don't like to see. But then again, I think that's what the public official's job is."

– Conrad Lee, Deputy Mayor, Bellevue, Wash.

Category	"Very Important"	One of top three
Build a stronger sense of community	80%	55%
Build trust between citizens and government	78%	40%
Provide people information about government policies and processes	71%	18%
Grow future community leaders	71%	25%
Involve people in government decision-making	66%	20%
Encourage citizens to devote some of their own time and energy to solving local problems	66%	17%
Get better solutions to local problems	62%	32%
Produce policy decisions that are more informed, more in line with what the community wants	55%	14%
Departments and agencies become more responsive to citizens	55%	11%
Get beyond usual participants - find out what a diversity of people think	53%	9%
Overcome tensions and divisions between different groups	40%	4%
Help people assess whether the distribution of public resources is fair	37%	5%

One of the top three most important rewards and benefits

"Very Important" rewards and benefits

Rewards and Benefits

When asked to consider the rewards and benefits of public engagement, a majority of municipal officials (55 percent) selected "build a stronger sense of community" as one of their top three answers from a list of thirteen. This was the only answer identified by a majority of respondents (See Figure 10).

If we batch respondents' possible selections in the "rewards and benefits" question into a few categories, we see that they were able to choose from three subsets of answers: a) rewards/benefits having to do with community-building; b) rewards/benefits having to do with the relationship between people and government; and c) rewards/benefits having to do with the community's ability to solve problems.

Each of the top three responses falls into a different category: "build a stronger sense of community" (community-building); "build trust between citizens and government" (citizen-government relations); and "get better solutions to local problems" (problem-solving) (See Figure 11).

Municipal officials see public engagement delivering a variety of positive outcomes. Apart from the fact that a majority say it contributes to a stronger sense of community, there is no clear consensus on one outcome, or one set of outcomes, that stands head and shoulders above the rest. Some see it as a way to better solutions, some see it as a way to better relationships between citizens and government, some see it as a way to build community — and most see it delivering a combination of all of these benefits at once.

This suggests that efforts to promote more public engagement on the part of municipal officials can't just focus on one set of rewards and benefits. Rather, it appears that municipal officials will respond positively to appeals that emphasize the full variety of positive outcomes that can accompany higher levels of public engagement.

Figure 11: Of the rewards and benefits listed in the previous question, which are most important for your city?

COMMUNITY BUILDING	
Build a stronger sense of community	55%
Grow future community leaders	25%
Get beyond usual participants - find out what a diversity of people think	9%
Overcome tensions and divisions between different groups	4%
CITIZEN-GOVERNMENT RELATIONS	
Build trust between citizens and government	40%
Involve people in government decision-making	20%
Provide people information about government policies and processes	18%
Produce policy decisions that are more informed, more in line with what the community wants	14%
Departments and agencies become more responsive to citizens	11%
Help people assess whether the distribution of public resources is fair	5%
LOCAL PROBLEM-SOLVING	
Get better solutions to local problems	32%
Encourage citizens to devote some of their own time and energy to solving local problems	17%

The perception among municipal officials that this work can deliver positive outcomes for cities was affirmed in their answer to a question about balancing the costs/risks vs. the rewards/benefits. Sixty-three percent of municipal officials said that the benefits and rewards of engaging more people in local public affairs outweigh the costs and risks. Only 7 percent said that the costs/risks outweigh the benefits/rewards.

> *"[Public engagement] would mean making public decisions that are fully informed with all the perspectives of our populace, our community, and that are well reasoned so that we can hear from the community what their thoughts are and reflect back to them why we made the decision that we did."*
>
> – Michele Straube, Coordinator, Salt Lake Solutions, Salt Lake City

Assessing the Needed Skills

The 2009 NLC survey also sought to gauge respondents' assessments of the skills needed to do effective public engagement. NLC highlighted the importance of having the proper skills for this work in the publication, *The Rise of Democratic Governance: How Local Leaders are Reshaping Politics for the 21st Century*, which stated:

> *"Ensuring effective governance of the community — rather than simply running the local government — requires different skills and attitudes than the ones taught in most public administration schools."*

The NLC publication also quoted Roger Stancil, city manager of Fayetteville, N.C., as saying, "You have to be able to frame issues in language that brings people of different perspectives to the same table."

In addition to skills related to framing and use of language, democratic governance experts regularly emphasize the importance of such skills as facilitative leadership, active listening and negotiation in the success of public engagement activities. Similarly, residents need specific skills to make the most of their role in public engagement processes — including the ability to articulate their opinions effectively, reach out to neighbors and run community meetings in participatory ways.

The 2009 NLC survey revealed that significant numbers of municipal officials have doubts about whether their colleagues and residents of their cities possess these types of skills. In fact, respondents were split down the middle when asked if most elected and appointed officials in their city have the skills, training and experience to do effective deliberative public engagement. Half (49 percent) said yes, and half (48 percent) said no, with 3 percent responding "don't know" (See Figure 12).

> *"There are very few people within the city government who have the skills and experience to do this work, but they have the will. They definitely want to do it and they're anxious to learn how to do it. So that's a positive. … We need capacity building internally and definitely in the community, we need a lot of capacity-building."*
>
> – Michele Straube, Coordinator, Salt Lake Solutions, Salt Lake City

In their answers to another question, half of municipal officials (49 percent) said that the skill and experience level of elected and appointed officials with deliberative public engagement had improved since they became involved in local public affairs (See
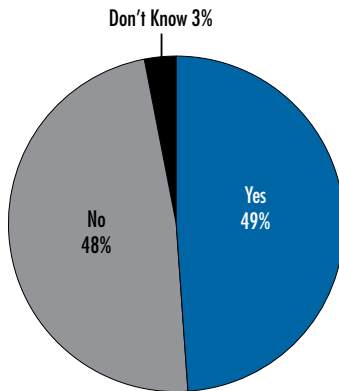

Figure 12: Do most elected and appointed officials in your city have the skills, training, and experience they need in order to do effective deliberative public engagement?
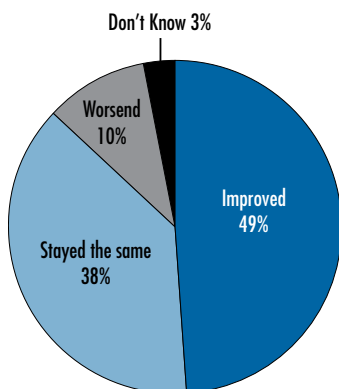

Figure 13: How has the skill/experience level of elected and appointed officials with deliberative public engagement changed over the time you have been involved in local public affairs?

Figure 13). It would be interesting and useful to have a better understanding of why these municipal officials believe this improvement has occurred. Identifying some of the key factors might hold lessons for future efforts to improve public engagement practice at the local level and would therefore be a fertile area for additional research.

At the same time, an equal proportion of respondents (48 percent) said that the skill and experience level of elected and appointed officials with deliberative public engagement had stayed the same (38 percent) or worsened (10 percent).

Municipal officials were similarly split on the question of whether residents have the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively. Forty-three percent answered yes, while 45 percent answered no. (See Figure 14). In addition, six in 10 (61 percent) said that resident skills and knowledge had stayed the same (51 percent) or worsened (10 percent) over the time that they had been involved in local public affairs. One-third (32 percent) said the skill/experience level of residents had improved (See Figure 15).

The bottom line is that almost half of municipal officials lack confidence in the capacity of their colleagues and local residents to do effective deliberative public engagement. As the survey shows, local officials perceive real value in these processes; they have seen them produce useful results and they perceive them as an effective way to achieve important goals, such as increased trust between residents and government. What they need, however, is training to do this work more effectively. And it is not just municipal officials. The survey suggests that the field of democratic governance could help residents and local leaders alike as they strive to make the most of these processes by helping them develop critical skills and experience.

> *"We don't spend enough time educating ourselves and understanding the processes that are useful. … There is a tendency to say we've done that before and we do the same thing over and over and over again."*
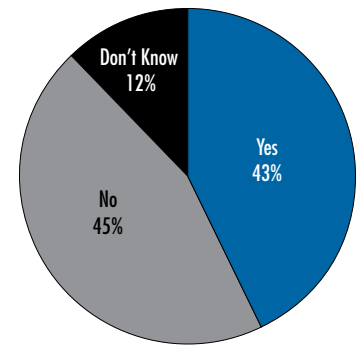> – Rodney Locks, Councilmember, Brevard, N.C.

Figure 14: Do most residents in your city have the skills and knowledge to participate effectively in delibrative public engagement processes?
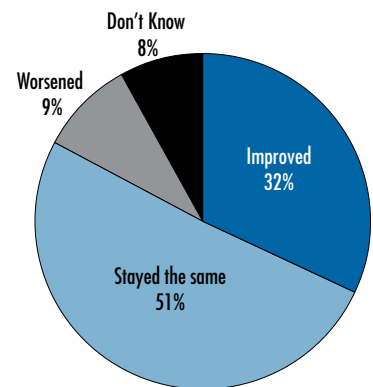

Figure 15: How has the skill/experience level of residents with deliberative public engagement changed over the time you have been involved in local public affairs?

ASSESSMENTS OF STAKEHOLDER ROLES IN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Municipal officials cannot ensure effective public engagement on their own. It takes a broad range of groups and individuals to organize and sustain these efforts, including residents, community organizations and the news media. The 2009 NLC survey indicates that municipal officials understand the importance of engaging other stakeholders. At the same time, however, many municipal officials have concerns about the degree to which the public and others play constructive roles in local public engagement processes. From these findings, we can infer that city officials are seeking more and better support from these various stakeholders to enhance deliberative engagement and local problem solving.

Municipal Officials' Roles

As explained earlier in this report, significant numbers of municipal officials express satisfaction with public engagement in their cities. They say that it is valued by the public and their colleagues, and they identify a range of rewards and benefits that it can bring to their communities. Yet engaging the public is not viewed by municipal officials as the most important aspect or function of their jobs. The NLC survey presented respondents with a list of nine job functions for municipal officials, ranging from developing policy and balancing the budget to mobilizing residents. The survey asked officials to rate the importance of each of these functions (See Figure 16).
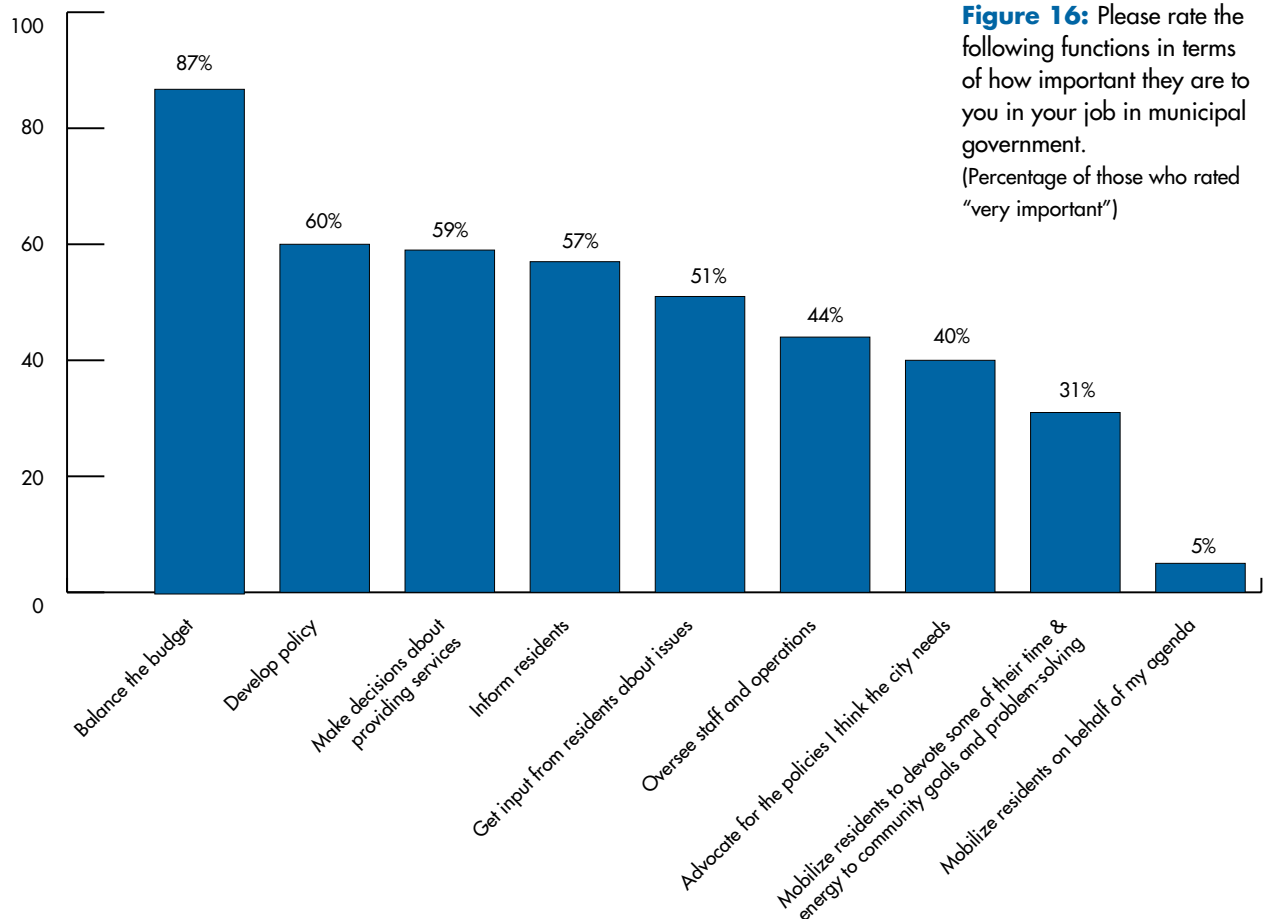

Figure 16: Please rate the following functions in terms of how important they are to you in your job in municipal government.
(Percentage of those who rated "very important")

Chart values:
- Balance the budget: 87%
- Develop policy: 60%
- Make decisions about providing services: 59%
- Inform residents: 57%
- Get input from residents about issues: 51%
- Oversee staff and operations: 44%
- Advocate for the policies I think the city needs: 40%
- Mobilize residents to devote some of their time & energy to community goals and problem-solving: 31%
- Mobilize residents on behalf of my agenda: 5%

In their responses, officials most frequently identified those functions having to do with government operations as very important. The top three selections identified as very important were: balance the budget (87 percent); develop policy (60 percent); and make decisions about providing services (59 percent).

In contrast, responses having to do with public engagement tended to fall in the middle or toward the bottom of the ranking. For example, 51 percent of officials said it was a very important function to get input from residents about issues. And, about one-third (31 percent) said it was very important to mobilize residents to devote some of their time and energy to community goals and problem solving.
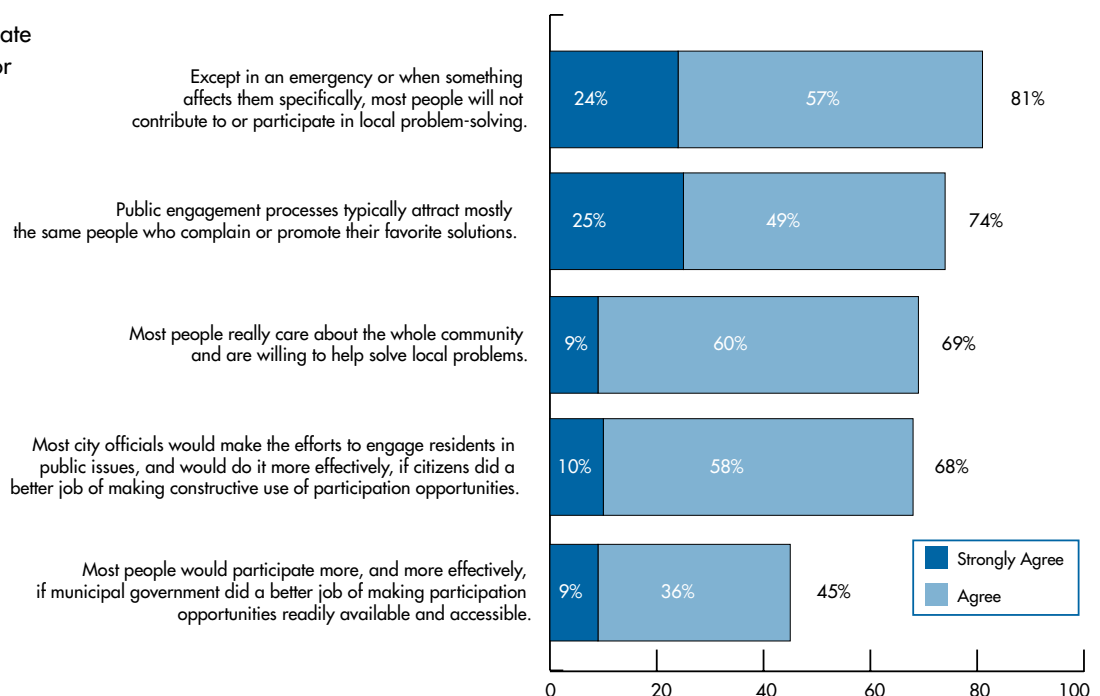
Asked to consider which functions have become more important since they began serving in local government, 58 percent of officials selected "balancing the budget." "Make decisions about providing services" (37 percent) and "inform residents" (36 percent) were the second and third most frequently chosen. The presence of "inform residents" among the top three responses is consistent with the focus on information in the discussion above (Figure 7) about the usefulness and effectiveness of public engagement.

Officials' responses to these questions indicate that they do not view public engagement as the main responsibility of local government and municipal officials. They tend to think it is important, but considering the other responsibilities of their jobs, plus their belief that others in their communities also have a role and responsibility to play (see below), many officials do not see this work as "job one" for them and their colleagues in municipal government.

The Role of the Public

Local officials appear to be of two minds on the topic of the public's role in the engagement process. On one hand, the survey responses suggest that municipal officials see the public as a positive force in local problem solving. Seven in 10 respondents (69 percent) agreed with the statement: "Most people really care about the whole community and are willing to help solve local problems" (See Figure 17; See Figure 9 for full data behind this figure).

Figure 17: Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Total
Except in an emergency or when something affects them specifically, most people will not contribute to or participate in local problem-solving.	24%	57%	81%
Public engagement processes typically attract mostly the same people who complain or promote their favorite solutions.	25%	49%	74%
Most people really care about the whole community and are willing to help solve local problems.	9%	60%	69%
Most city officials would make the efforts to engage residents in public issues, and would do it more effectively, if citizens did a better job of making constructive use of participation opportunities.	10%	58%	68%
Most people would participate more, and more effectively, if municipal government did a better job of making participation opportunities readily available and accessible.	9%	36%	45%

On the other hand, additional findings support the view that many municipal officials think the public is *not* helpful and does *not* participate in civic engagement processes unless an issue affects them individually. As noted above, the most frequently selected obstacle to or risk of public engagement was "public apathy and/or ambivalence," chosen by 69 percent of municipal officials from a list of 17 possible answers. Additionally, eight in 10 respondents (81 percent) agreed that public engagement processes typically attract mostly the same people who complain or promote their favorite solutions. And, three out of four (74 percent) said they agreed that most people will not contribute to or participate in local problem solving except in an emergency or when something affects them specifically.

Similarly, when asked to rate the importance of various public roles and responsibilities of people in their cities, more respondents checked "very important" next to such roles as "be law-abiding and responsible for personal affairs" (68 percent) and "pay taxes and fees" (60 percent) than "volunteer to serve on boards and committees" (30 percent) and "pitch in to help solve public problems; don't ask government to solve all problems" (37 percent). Municipal officials appear to see public engagement not as a core role or responsibility of local residents but as something that is secondary to other activities. (See Figure 18).

Figure 18: Please rate the importance of the following public roles and responsibilities of people who live in your city. (Percentage of those who rated "very important")
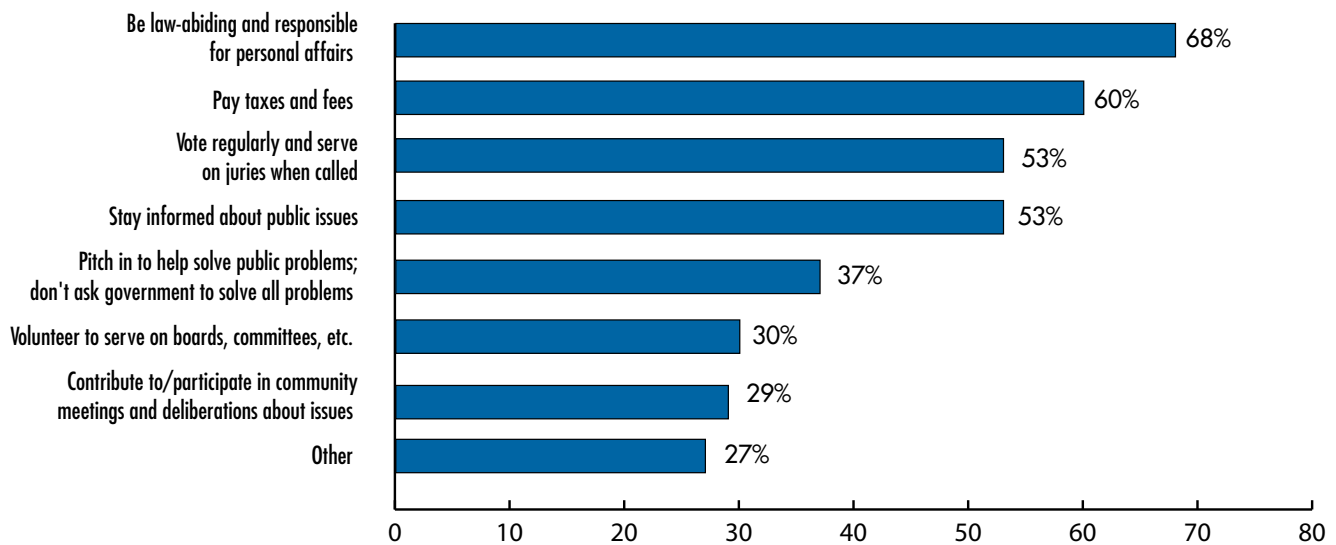
This interpretation parallels the survey results about how local officials view their own roles. In both instances — whether they are thinking about the public or about themselves — more public officials attach more importance to a set of roles and responsibilities that speak to the most basic functions of government. Government is dutybound to balance budgets, just as citizens are duty-bound to obey the laws. At the same time, many municipal officials attribute great value to the deliberative collaboration of officials and citizens to address local problems. A challenging opportunity thus presents itself to develop ways of integrating these disparate views.

"Public engagement means that the public, just regular people, are involved in the city … they're intrigued, they ask questions. They come to city council meetings and get up at the podium and say stuff. They show an interest in current City Council agenda items. And mostly they show an interest in the community as a whole. … They e-mail us. They meet with our neighbors, affect power."

– Kerry Kincaid, City Council President, Eau Claire, Wis.

The Role of the Media and Others

The NLC survey also asked municipal officials about their views of how well the media, community groups and institutions contribute to the local culture and climate of public engagement. Respondents indicated that they believe these community partners for public engagement efforts are not performing very well.

"I don't know that we have been using the media as a public engagement strategy adequately. And so often the media will report on things inaccurately probably because we didn't get the message out. … I don't mean the message is wrong. It's not complete."

– Michele Straube, Coordinator, Salt Lake Solutions, Salt Lake City

As noted above, 39 percent of municipal officials cited the following as an obstacle to greater levels of public engagement: "Media not paying attention and/or is not fair and balanced." The only obstacle or risk that was selected more often was "public apathy and/or ambivalence."

"The media seems to concentrate on more negative items which sell their papers, than on getting involved in the positives."

– Don Rosen, Commissioner, Sunrise, Fla.

Respondents' negative opinions of the media's role in public engagement showed up in their answers to other questions in the survey. For example, only one in four municipal officials (25 percent) rated the media as being good at informing people and local public affairs with fair and balanced reporting; 30 percent rated the media as poor in this area. (See Figure 19). In addition, more than half (53 percent) said the media does

Figure 19: Please rate how the **local media** overall contribute to the local culture of public engagement.

*Percentages may not add to 100% since respondents were given the option to mark not applicable (N/A)
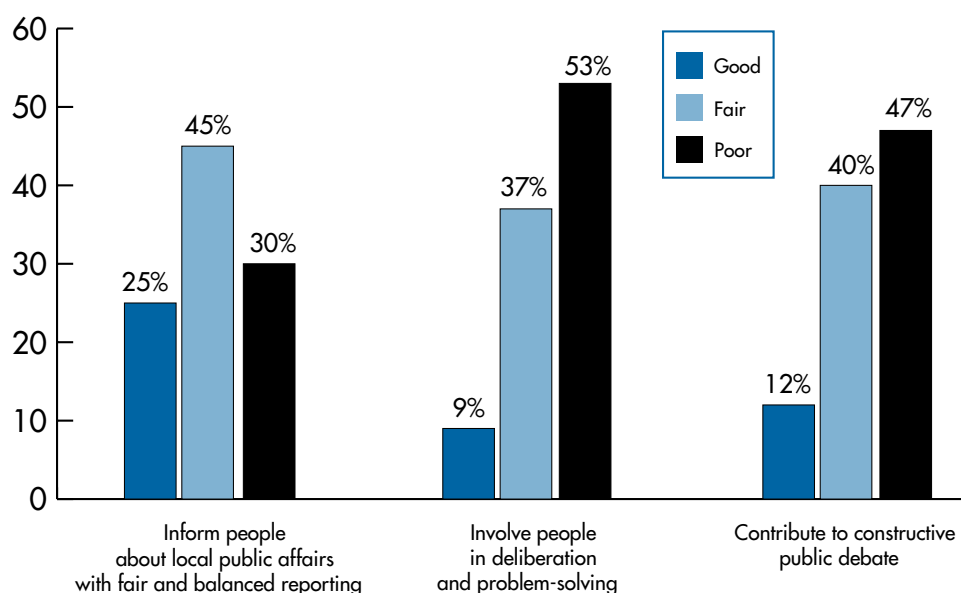
a poor job of involving people in deliberation and problem solving, and 47 percent said the media does a poor job of contributing to constructive debate.

Special-interest groups also received negative ratings from many officials regarding their contributions to the local culture of public engagement:

- Nearly two in five (39 percent) officials rated special-interest groups as poor at informing people about local public affairs with fair and balanced reporting.
- About one in three (34 percent) city officials said they believe that special-interest groups do a poor job of involving people in deliberation and problem solving.
- Only 7 percent of municipal officials rated special-interest groups as good contributors to constructive public debate (See Figure 20).
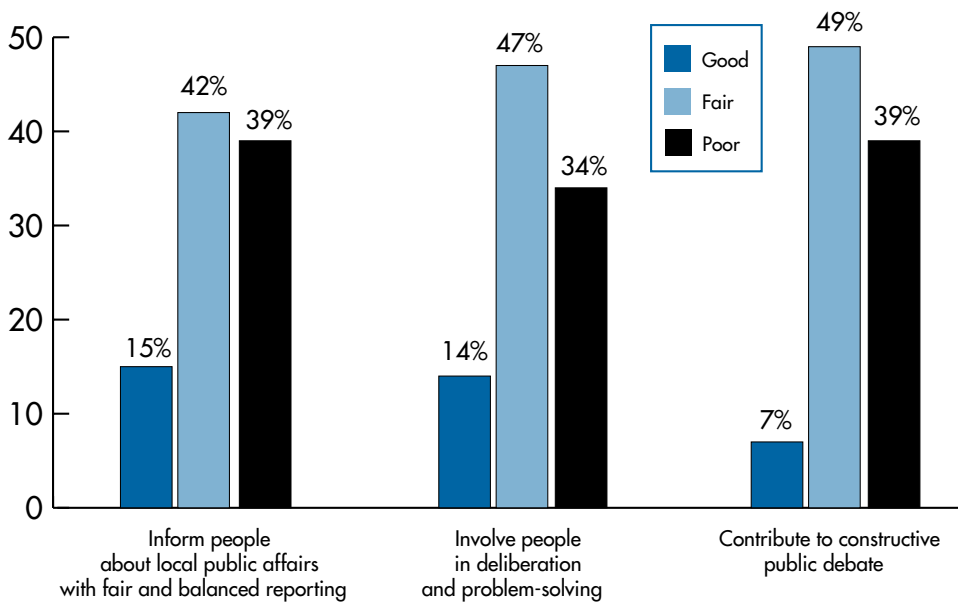

Figure 20: Please rate how **special interest groups** overall contribute to the local culture of public engagement.

*Percentages may not add to 100% since respondents were given the option to mark not applicable (N/A).

Community and civic groups are viewed more favorably by city officials for their overall contribution to public engagement. Between a quarter and a third of respondents rated these groups as good on the three types of contributions to public engagement (See Figure 21, next page).

"We have five neighborhood associations in a city of about 70,000 people. They have regular meetings … but often you don't hear from them unless [there is an] issue. The whole council tightens up their shoulders. They're active and they're out there all the time, but the relationship isn't always good."
— Kerry Kincaid, City Council President, Eau Claire, Wis.

"The Rotary has become a place where local government, local school boards and local nonprofits actually interact. And that's clearly why this is one of the more successful groups in getting things done."
— Mark Linder, Director, Parks and Recreation, Cupertino, Calif.

Figure 21: Please rate how **community and civic groups** overall contribute to the local culture of public engagement.

*Percentages may not add to 100% since respondents were given the option to mark not applicable (N/A).
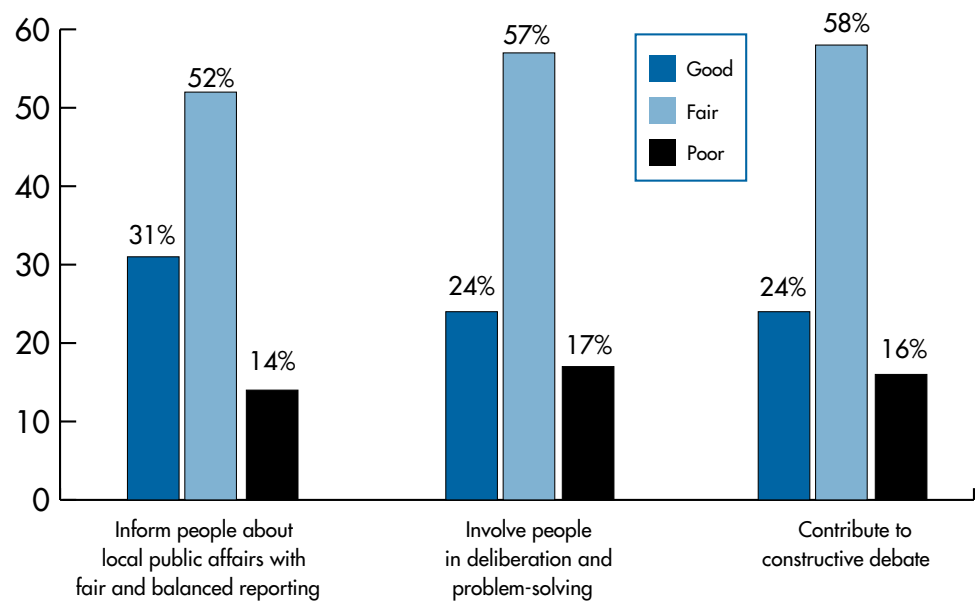
"We are trying to reach out beyond neighborhood associations. We are trying to establish captains. …We haven't officially found a name, but they would be the liaisons between the council and the community constituents where we can create forums and have a direct connection with someone in each and every neighborhood."

– Cynthia Stamps-Jones, Councilmember, Riverdale, Calif.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study opens as many or more questions as it answers. In a rich and significant field such as democratic governance and public engagement, the answers to any interesting question lead to more questions. Each step forward moves us, or should move us, deeper into the topic. In particular, this process of investigation seeks results that can help advance the theory and practice of democracy. The findings in the preceding chapters and the new questions they may raise are as important for reflective practitioners as for scholars and analysts.

In Chapter 1, we offered some "observations" that shaped our thinking about the findings.

- *Place matters … and places are different.*
- *Public engagement means different things to different people.*
- *It takes a village to do effective public engagement.*
- *Municipal officials and other stakeholders have different ideas about what makes public engagement effective.*
- *Municipal officials are ambivalent on this topic.*
- *Municipal officials and residents need skills to do this work well.*

We believe these observations deserve more thought and, no doubt, revision and improvement.

We also believe there are other opportunities for further investigation of issues and questions that are mentioned in or arise from the analyses in this report. These matters for further research include:

- **What is the nature and impact of planning for public engagement?** In Chapter 2, we reported that 28 percent of respondents said their city's public engagement work is guided by a plan. Presumably, such plans have been discussed publicly and approved by municipal officials, but we don't know that for sure. A useful next step would be to explore in more detail exactly what is (and is not) in these plans, how they were adopted, how they are used, whether they contain some sense of goal and mission or are mere process reviews, whether they effectively shape behavior and implementation and so on. Comparing cities with plans to cities without plans might also give us some sense of the consequences of such plans. Lessons from such explorations could be useful for other cities.

- **Why do officials use public engagement on some topics and not others?** Also in Chapter 2, we reported that municipal officials say that their city is more likely to deploy public engagement processes for some topics than others. We ventured some hypotheses as to why this might be so. Refining and testing these and other hypotheses seems to us to be an important investigation for the field. Do cities tend to use public engagement differently, depending on the topic and the situation? Or do they have a standard toolkit, no matter the topic?

- **Why and how have skills improved according to some officials?** Half of municipal officials (49 percent) said that the skill and experience level of elected and appointed officials with deliberative public engagement had improved since they (the respondents) became involved in local public affairs (see Chapter 3). It would be interesting and potentially useful to have a better understanding of why these municipal officials believe this improvement has occurred. Identifying some of the key factors that led to improvement might hold lessons for future efforts to improve skills for public engagement practice at the local level.

- **What do cities' on-the-ground experiences say about what works in specific places?** In Chapter 2, we raised the question of what counts as "public engagement," based on the wide-ranging responses from municipal officials. One of the observations we offered in the introductory chapter reflected a bit on that issue as well. There is a good deal of food for thought around this matter. In terms of further research on this specific topic, we would *not* recommend as a first step a survey of cities to determine whether they do this or that. Rather, the "place matters" dictum comes into play. Good case studies — in effect, audits of what's going on in a particular place — would seem more apt, because we hypothesize that it is the mix of activities and the way people view them that probably matters more than the presence or absence of a specific activity. Whatever the methodology, more exploration and discussion might broaden and deepen this topic.

- **How has the economic recession affected cities' public engagement work?** More than one-third of municipal officials (35 percent) said their city did more in the previous year to engage residents in budgeting and finance processes than it usually does (Chapter 2). The effects of the recession will continue, and municipal budgets are likely to continue to feel the pinch for one or two more years. We are presented here with the opportunity for a natural experiment. This might involve monitoring the reported uptick in participatory budgeting, determining exactly what it involves, comparing activities and outcomes in cities that do not do this, and watching to see whether or not the phenomenon disappears when city revenues pick up again. A major set of changes may be under way in the ways that municipal governments and citizens do budgets (or, not; but if not, why not?)

- **Why do so many municipal officials see good information as the basis for public engagement, and what does that say about working toward more effective processes?** The high importance that municipal officials attribute to useful, balanced information deserves considerable thought and investigation. As we noted in Chapter 3, a good deal may be packed into this concept and it may constitute a professionally defined framing for how governance is conducted. Carefully unpacking it might yield useful results. The point of research would not be to seek to abolish the frame, but rather to make it more visible and explicit and to help officials and citizens see its implications. Some research exists, in the public administration and political science literatures, on this matter. Bringing it to bear on the democracy topic would be of substantial interest.

- **What do municipal official find useful about public engagement?** The 13 response options for the survey question regarding the effectiveness of public engagement (Figure 7) fall roughly into three categories: a) the quality of the *information* people receive via public engagement processes; b) the characteristics of the *process* they are part of and c) *problem solving*. Comparing this data and discussion with the findings regarding rewards and benefits would seem to be a starting point for a potentially fruitful line for further research in search of deeper and more precise understandings of what municipal officials find useful about public engagement.

Other observers will have additional suggestions for further research and for topics that deserve more careful discussion. We welcome comments from interested readers.

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