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# Seeking Solutions to Long-Term Public Engagement in Rapidly Diversifying Communities: A Case Study in Washington County, Oregon

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# Seeking Solutions to Long-Term Public Engagement in Rapidly Diversifying Communities: a Case Study in Washington County, Oregon

by Meg Merrick and Andrée Tremoulet, Portland State University

## Introduction

This paper explores the challenges in engaging a rapidly diversifying public in county government decision-making. The State of Oregon recognized the importance of *meaningful* public engagement by naming it as the first goal of its landmark statewide land use planning system adopted in 1973. Washington County, which is part of Portland's tri-county metropolitan region, is geographically large, historically white but, in recent years, rapidly diversifying. It is also largely suburban and includes the region's largest unincorporated communities. In addition, Washington County includes significant agricultural activities and small rural communities.

In the 1970s, Washington County created Citizen Planning Organizations (CPOs) to represent 10 geographic areas to meet the state mandated long-term public engagement requirement. These organizations initially were focused on land use issues, as they were initially created as a way to organize citizen engagement in the development of the County's new comprehensive plan. Washington County's CPO program was recognized by the American Planning Association as an outstanding public participation program nationally. Over time, the charge of CPOs evolved to include broader livability concerns. To respond to this change, CPO came to mean "Citizen Participation Organizations."

In an unusual move, rather than staffing the program itself, Washington County opted to contract with Oregon State University (OSU) Extension to support the CPOs. When, in the spring of 2015, OSU Extension determined that this service no longer fit with its mission, the Washington County Board of Commissioners initiated a process to re-examine the entire program with an eye toward promoting more inclusive community engagement (including communities of color, recent immigrants, GenXers/millennials, and rural community members) using both traditional and 21<sup>st</sup> century tools in the context of the county's rapidly changing demography.

To get a better sense of how the current CPO system was working, consultants, Joe Hertzberg and Holly Van Houten (Solid Ground Consulting) conducted 20 key stakeholder (CPO leaders, community leaders, and County staff) interviews about their sense of the current CPO system, its strengths and weaknesses, and any concerns that they might have. The major findings were:

- Community participation can serve multiple purposes. The County should clarify which of these the County appointed transition team should focus on.
- All public sector community engagement efforts are struggling to engage a broad public, not just Washington County.
- Large and growing segments of the population are underrepresented in the current structure, including communities of color, young people, and the business community.
- Cities, urban unincorporated communities, and rural areas pose different challenges: one size may not fit all.
- Some interviewees questioned how much the County values community participation.

- All of the interviewees recognized the value of “21<sup>st</sup> Century” digital engagement tools but didn’t think that they were a replacement for face-to-face meetings.
- Community education and training are invaluable to building awareness of basic concepts of local government and to building skills of leadership and effectiveness.

Additionally, other weaknesses of the CPO system were recognized. Many of the current CPO boundaries included populations that had few significant common bonds. A single CPO could include heavily urbanized communities and relatively isolated, small rural towns. Some spanned a large geographic area—as much as 12.5 square miles. Regular participation was often sparse and some CPOs were inactive. Participation depended entirely on attending meetings without any assistance from 21<sup>st</sup> century digital tools for communication and decision-making. Moreover, the system depended on volunteers for marketing and outreach (Hertzberg and Van Houten, 2015).

As public engagement researchers, we were asked to identify promising practices for community engagement that would be used by a County Commission appointed Transition Team to make recommendations for its long-term public engagement program moving forward. The County’s assumption was that the task would be relatively simple because there were undoubtedly other counties, similar to Washington County, whose programs it could adapt and adopt.

Early in our research, it became clear, however, that there would be no silver bullet but rather bits and pieces of seemingly successful programs in cities and counties that could provide insight for some aspects of the program but not the roadmap that the County needed to build a new program. Instead, our research suggested the necessity of developing clarity and consensus around a series of large topics that we thought should underpin an effective public engagement program. These include:

- An understanding of the program’s constituencies;
- The program’s purpose and content;
- The importance of civic education and leadership development to engaging a broader public;
- Digital practices (for engagement enhancements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century);
- Issues of staffing (internal or external) and implementation.

These considerations provided the roadmap that the Transition Team used to develop the recommendations that they submitted to the Washington County Commission in late 2015.

As our work got started, it became clear that we would need to provide clarity about the differences between short-term and long-term public engagement programs because this work would focus on only one aspect of the broader practice of community participation: long-term programs and structures that facilitate dialogue and collaboration among local government and communities on a broad range of issues, as opposed to short-term efforts that are directed at specific plans and initiatives (figure 1).



Figure 1. Short-term vs. ongoing participation structures.

Short-term community participation efforts are typically focused and intense. Participants are asked to become deeply involved in discussions about a specific topic. Sometimes government may have access to enhanced resources (e.g., additional funds and consultants) to facilitate that dialogue. The process typically ends at a concluding point signaled by a decision, such as the adoption of a plan.

In contrast, long-term community participation often takes one of three forms: one-way informal outreach through websites, newsletters, and social media; representative involvement through permanent governmental commissions and committees, and dialogic interaction with community groups on a variety of topics. Our roadmap was focused on the third of these forms and focused on the interactive process.

What follows is a more detailed discussion of the aforementioned big topics that provided the roadmap for the Transition Team. We conclude with a synopsis of the Transition Team’s recommendations and a subsequent staffing recommendation made by County staff, and announced on March 1, 2016.

### **Constituencies: the Building Blocks**

The structure of a community participation program is often built around the specific constituencies or communities it serves. Historically, the Washington County CPO program has been based on geographically based community groups. The county was divided into several CPOs that were, for the most part, geographically large (as large as 12.5 square miles) including urban, suburban, and far-flung rural communities. Participation in the CPOs has become, over time, less and less representative of the populations they are meant to serve.

Our research indicated that, in the decades since the CPO program had been established, the general understanding of *community* had broadened to include not just a group of people associated with a particular geographic area, but also human associations based on identity (e.g., the Latino community) or interest (e.g., the cycling community).

Sometimes individuals have a stronger sense of belonging to a community of identity or interest than a geographic community based on where they live or work. In general, the stronger the sense of community, the more likely it is that an individual will feel comfortable being an active member. Some community participation programs have found ways to incorporate other kinds of communities as well as traditional neighborhoods in their structures. One example is the City of Portland’s Office of Neighborhood Involvement (figure 2).

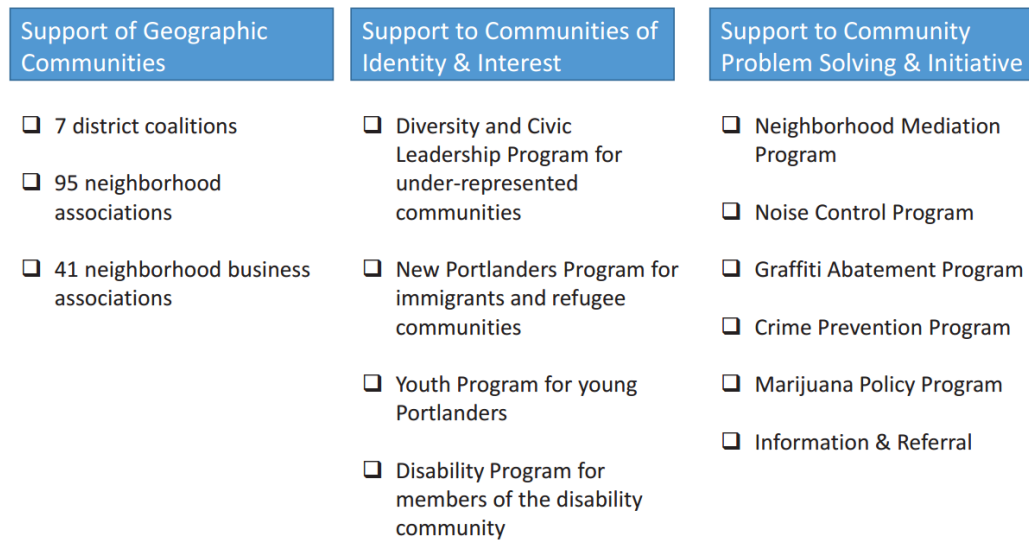


Figure 2. The structure of the City of Portland’s public engagement program, Office of Neighborhood Involvement.

The City of Portland, through its Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI), incorporates the participation of many types of communities in its structure. The majority of its programs fall into one of three categories: support of geographic communities; support for communities of identity or interest; and support for community problem-solving.

Additionally, this structure provides for two scales of geographic communities, neighborhoods and districts; groups of adjacent neighborhoods nest into the districts. The geographic communities also include neighborhood business district associations, which, while typically situated in single neighborhoods, have a different constituency: small business owners.

The structure also provides entry points for people who identify with others from a particular culture, age, or disability, and creates a formal role for these groups to interact with city bureaus. And ONI provides programs that help communities to build on their assets and resolve

community problems, such as graffiti and crime, they help community groups tackle community-initiated projects.

This is but one example of a structure that acknowledges the importance of institutionalizing the outreach to various types of communities and community identification in order to strengthen public involvement by a broader constituency in the city of Portland.

### Geographic Communities: Scale and Characteristics

In terms of geographic communities, the question of how large or small they should be is important because it relates not just to obstacles to attending community meetings (such as travel time) but to the strength of commitment or identification to particular places. The Washington County CPO program appeared to be driven by decisions made in the early 1970s, at least partly based on the number of planners who were available at the time to staff geographically-based planning areas. These Community Planning Organization areas were a means of organizing the citizen involvement program for the land use planning process required by the state. While more recently there were discussions about boundary changes that could be more reflective of today's geographic communities, no significant changes to the scale of the CPOs had occurred.

Authors Putnam, Feldman, and Cohen (2003) state that smaller groups are better for building bonds of trust and reciprocity, whereas larger groups are building mass and power (figure 3).

Small Scale	Large Scale
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Supports the development of bonds among members</li><li>• Easier to listen &amp; talk</li><li>• Offers better footholds for small steps</li><li>• Promotes sense of individual responsibility</li><li>• Supports empathy</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Helps build critical mass</li><li>• Can help build power to achieve critical objectives</li></ul>

Source: Adapted from Putnam, Feldstein & Cohen, 2003.

Figure 3. Benefits of small and large scale involvement.

But scale can also affect the engagement of communities of color (which were largely absent from CPO activity). Portney and Berry's 1997 "Mobilizing Minority Communities: Social Capital and Participation in Urban Neighborhoods," a study of the involvement of communities of color in four cities, found that minority participation rates in neighborhood associations increased as the percentage of a minority population within the neighborhood increased. These neighborhoods were seen as comfortable places, suggesting that providing for smaller geographical units – places where people of color live – might promote greater engagement of these communities.

## Purpose and Content

The purpose of a program is its driving force. It influences the structure, activities, and kinds of support required. As to be expected, the purpose and content of Washington County's CPO program evolved over time (figure 4).

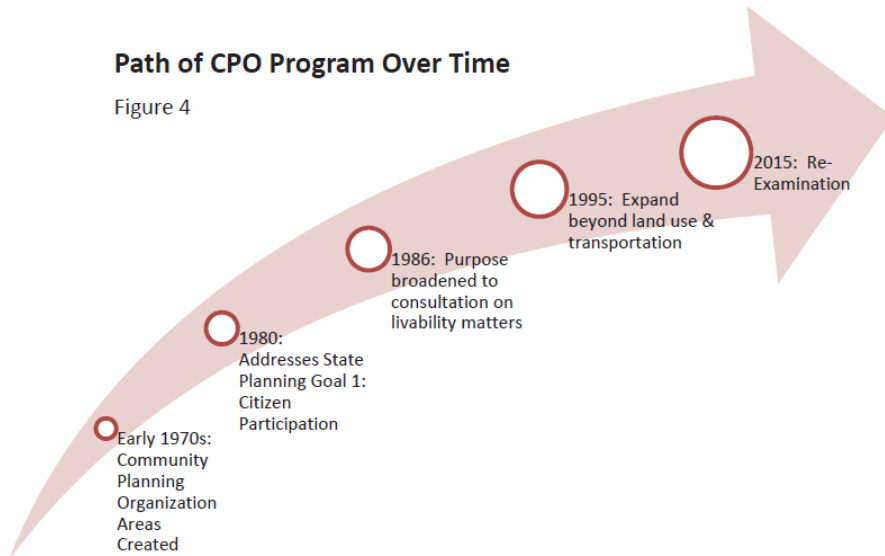


Figure 4. The path of the CPO Program over time.

As figure 4 suggests, in the mid-1980s the program began to broaden its focus from strictly land use and transportation issues to advising and consulting with the County Commission on livability concerns. This broadening of purpose has been seen as important but has also created additional burdens and expectations for the program including the necessity of more inclusive participation.

This leads to the question of who initiates public participation and community building and who sets the agenda? During the heyday of the neighborhood movement, some neighborhood programs were established to help community members to regain control of their neighborhood and tap the energies and talents of neighborhood members. The programs were about community-led problem-solving and planning. This approach is heavily influenced by community organizing/empowerment perspectives.

Other programs were established as a way to ensure that affected community members have a say in shaping critical public sector issues. These other programs provided a way to capture the wisdom of the community in public decision-making and were more from the public participation perspective. These two contrasting purposes are illustrated in figure 5.

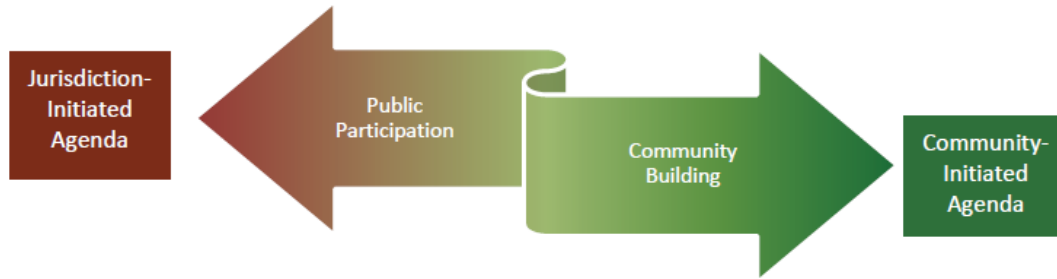


Figure 5. Who sets the agenda?

Public participation provides a means for community members to receive information about public sector issues and consult with developers and the public sector about plans, policies and related actions. Community building, on the other hand, provides a means for community members to identify opportunities and problems, deliberate about possible solutions, recruit resources (including those of local government), and organize for action. While it is useful to think of these purposes as opposite ends of a continuum, in practice a program is likely to have some activities that feel more like public participation and others that are more like community building. In general, programs are likely to favor one approach over the other and fall somewhere within the continuum. The St. Johns County Neighborhood Association Bill of Rights falls more on the public participation side of the continuum, and the Roanoke Neighborhood Partnership, for example, falls closer to the community building end of the continuum (Merrick and Tremoulet, 2015).

Community building and public participation are different but potentially complementary functions of a community participation program. And, being clear about where a program should be on that continuum is important.

### **Civic Education and Leadership**

Our democracy depends on an informed and engaged public. How we learn about government and how we learn to engage with government are influenced by a number of factors including the cultures in which we live, the models and expectations that family members set, the behaviors of our friends and colleagues, the news media we consume, and the civics education we receive in school and elsewhere.

Civics education should not only enhance our political knowledge but should also improve our political efficacy by informing our civic actions including when and how we vote and how we engage with local government. Gainous and Martens (2011) call this “democratic capacity.” Exercising one’s democratic capacity can be very confusing in the context of county government where the boundaries of service provision and authority aren’t always clear. This is especially true in Washington County which offers some “urban” services (such as law enforcement) to a large unincorporated population. What complicates this further is the rapidly growing non-English speaking population that must overcome language barriers in addition to a foreign form of government.



Gainous and Martens suggest that the best way to increase our democratic capacity may be to increase resources for civics education programs that promote greater news consumption in the home, encourage family political discussions and model political engagement – citing “Kids Voting USA” as one example.

What these authors’ work points to is the importance of providing the right kinds of education and training opportunities, particularly for households with lower educational attainment and fewer resources – often communities of color. One avenue is to build leadership capacity within these communities that support their democratic capacity and civic engagement. There are community-based nonprofits throughout the nation and in Washington County that provide leadership and civics training, but direct connections with the County specifically focused on its CPO program had not been established.

### **The Role of Facilitative Leadership**

The importance of good facilitation and building trust through an atmosphere of inclusiveness, dignity, and mutual respect, in the context of CPO meetings, has long been acknowledged by CPO staff and the supporting CPO Handbook. In other words, leadership skill and style matter especially when attempting to broaden the community engagement tent. The type of leadership that promotes these values is often called “facilitative” because it welcomes all viewpoints. This type of leadership, however, requires skill and, therefore, training. And while the CPO staff understood the importance of this skill to the success of its program, little if any training and support was offered.

### **Digital Approaches to Public Participation**

Most political observers believe that public involvement via the Internet has huge potential. This is because a technology-enabled deliberative democracy, in theory, offers (Coleman and Goze, n.d.):

- Access to balanced information
- An open agenda
- Time to consider issues expansively
- Relative freedom from manipulation and coercion
- A rule-based framework for discussion
- Participation by an inclusive sample of citizens
- Scope for free interaction between participants
- A recognition of differences between participants, but a rejection of status-based prejudice because of the elimination of visual cues

Prior to the widespread adoption of the Internet, public participation in policy-related processes largely depended on face-to-face meetings, open houses, and town halls. While these traditional methods have generally served us well, researchers and community members have argued that these methods have encountered challenges that the appropriate use of online technologies could overcome. According to Barbham (2013), these challenges include:

- The inclusion of diverse and underrepresented populations
- The influence of poor facilitation
- The intimidating presence and influence of vocal and powerful special interests
- A lack of participation from community members who don't feel welcome at meetings

Brabham suggests that some of the advantages of Internet technology to address these challenges are:

- The asynchronous (not real time) nature of the Internet
- People's ability to contribute to discussions without the "burden of non-verbal politics"
- The Internet is interactive technology that encourages "ongoing co-creation of new ideas"
- Users can develop their own online identities or choose to remain anonymous
- The seemingly low cost of online surveys, blogs, and social media

Internet technologies are now an integral part of doing the business of government and are widely used to distribute information to the public through websites and email lists. And as the popularity of social media have increased, in addition to the widespread adoption of tech-enabled handheld devices, the potential of social media to reach a dramatically broader public is increasingly being utilized by politicians and government agencies.

The Internet and mobile technologies have opened up a host of opportunities to engage a broad public in the policy arena and firms have responded by developing a wide array of online engagement tools that include real-time virtual meetings and discussions, surveys and polling, interactive budget tools, planning games, comment boards, and interactive mapping.

### **Digital Approaches and Broadening Engagement**

#### *Internet Access and Social Media Use by Ethnic and Racial Minorities*

A 2010 Pew Research Center report identified several trends in the use of Internet technology by people of color since the year 2000. They are:

- The Internet and broadband are being used by an increasingly diverse population. Between 2000 and 2010, the proportion of black or Latino users of the Internet nearly doubled from 11 percent to 21 percent. African Americans were still less likely to use the Internet than whites. On the other hand, English-speaking Latinos were nearly the same as whites in their use of the Internet and home-based broadband. However, foreign-born and Spanish-dominant Latinos were much less likely than whites and English-speaking Latinos to use these technologies. The Pew research suggests that one of the most powerful predictors of Internet use among Latinos in the U.S. is English language proficiency.
- Digital access is increasingly disconnected from the desktop. It's going mobile and blacks and Latinos are significant adopters of mobile devices, especially mobile phones.
- Racial and ethnic minority Internet users use social media at higher rates. Among Internet users, seven of ten blacks and English-speaking Latinos use social networking websites as opposed to six out of ten whites. Importantly, when Pew asked about government

outreach using social media, the minority respondents were significantly more likely than whites to agree that this type of outreach “helps people to be more informed about what government is doing” and “makes government more accessible (Smith, 2010).

The Pew researchers concluded that online venues such as social networking websites, blogs, and neighborhood listservs can be valuable tools for reaching racial and ethnic minorities on local issues.

### *Digital Media and Millennials*

Numerous studies and commentators have expressed concern over the decline in traditional forms of political and community engagement among the younger generation, sometimes referred to as “Millennials,” or those born after 1979. While some data indicate that Millennials volunteer at a higher rate than other generations, evidence suggests that they do it differently, engaging in social media to connect with others and promote causes rather than face-to-face interactions (Gliman and Stokes, 2014; Feldman, 2014).

Gagnier (2008) analyzed the results of the 2010 Democracy 2.0 Summit that was sponsored by Mobilize.org whose mission is to empower and invest in Millennials to develop solutions to social problems. The purpose of the Summit was to convene Millennials to identify their strengths and weaknesses related to volunteerism and to challenge them to figure out how to leverage their strengths for tech-enabled democracy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The participants agreed that their generation is typically:

- Technological
- Tech dependent
- Communication savvy
- Multitaskers
- Social networkers and interconnected
- Image conscious
- Prone to instant gratification

Gagnier’s conclusion was that Millennials are “seeking forms of self-definition and outlets in which they can generate their own solutions to our society’s problems.”

Feldman’s study, the *Inspiring the Next Generation Workforce: the 2014 Millennial Impact Report*, reiterates Gagnier’s findings and adds that, in terms of volunteerism, Millennials want to be able to experience an organization’s work without having to be on site. In other words, at least initially, they prefer online communication and engagement to on-site, face-to-face commitments.

### *Rural Communities and the Internet*

In 2014, the Pew Research Center conducted a national survey to determine the state of “The Web at 25 in the US.” Up until recently, Internet and broadband access had been significantly lower in rural areas than in urban and suburban communities. Interestingly, although this survey

indicated that there was still less access in rural areas in 2014 than in urban and suburban areas, the difference had narrowed.

Perhaps most relevant to public engagement via the Internet, among the adult participants, 83 percent of rural respondents indicated that they use the Internet, email, or access the Internet using mobile devices, while 88 percent of urban respondents and 87 of suburban respondents did. This was a dramatic increase in access to the Internet via various devices for rural respondents and could be leveraged to increase rural engagement in public processes especially where face-to-face meetings, at the CPO level, can mean significant travel time.

Dukeshire and Thurlow (2002), in their research on the challenges to rural engagement in Canada, have pointed to potentially unwanted political and social visibility that can result from policy-focused engagement in small communities as one reason that rural community members resist involving themselves in policy-related activities. One of the benefits cited by many observers of digital engagement processes is the option for anonymity that is available to participants using the Internet as the engagement platform.

### *Some Caveats*

While some degree of Internet community engagement is already integral to the ways that government agencies and elected officials communicate with the public – particularly, because of the apparent low cost and efficiency – digital approaches are not a panacea and there may be hidden costs and concerns. These are a few:

- Recruitment. Recruitment is just as important in getting community members to use online options for engagement as it is in traditional face-to-face approaches.
- User anonymity. The anonymity of users and the security of user content are important considerations that also have costs.
- Unrecognized maintenance costs. Aside from purchasing a particular digital engagement tool, there are the costs of site administration, content development, and training that are essential to bringing community members to these sites and keeping them there that must be considered.
- Online public engagement tools are in their infancy and not much is known about their impacts including: the effects of user interface design on usability; the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data; the effect of these data on staff and elected officials and their actions.

### **Staffing and Implementation**

The decision to manage a long-term community participation program externally, as Washington County has done through Oregon State University Extension, is unusual. While Silverman, Taylor and Crawford (2008) state that government is increasingly contracting out planning functions, including public participation – making the role of community members in planning processes “somewhat ambiguous” – these contracts tend to be focused on short-term projects rather than the kind of long-term program that the CPOs have represented.

## Advantages and Disadvantages to External Program Management

The key advantages to external management of a community participation program are outlined as follows:

- Objectivity. As a separate entity, an externally-managed program does not appear to carry with it a county (or city)-driven political agenda.
- Fixed, predictable costs. Fixed price contracts for a certain level of services offer predictability. The special requirement of public engagement, its complexities and ambiguities can bring uncertainties that are difficult to predict in terms of budgeting. The burden rests on the contractor.
- Specialized expertise. Techniques and tools are constantly changing, especially in the digital realm of public engagement. It can be costly to train staff and commit to software in this fast-changing environment.

All of these are considerable advantages, but there are disadvantages to this approach, as evidenced by OSU Extension's decision to stop supporting Washington County's program. Some of the disadvantages to external support can be summarized as follows:

- Contractors may disengage from the program.
- For long-term public engagement, especially at the county level, the desired skillset may be difficult to find.
- Public sector vs. private sector external staffing. The experiences that most governments have in contracting with private sector firms for public engagement services is with short-term, often externally funded projects. Therefore, the impacts of contracting with the private or even nonprofit sectors are unknown.

## Advantages and Disadvantages to Internal Program Management

Nearly all long-term public sector public engagement programs are staffed internally, so there is more evidence in the literature about internally managed programs. Key advantages include:

- Public engagement values, skills, and experiences are more likely to be integrated across government programs and projects. In reviewing Washington County's program, including the *2014 CPO Handbook* and the County's *2014 Land Use and Transportation (LUT) Guidelines*, we were struck by the comprehensiveness of the handbook and the inclusion of many public engagement best practices including the importance of engaging a diverse population, and ideas about how to deal with volunteer burn-out. But it was also clear that the program depended, overwhelmingly, on the traditional approach of face-to-face meetings with rather strict procedural requirements such as *Roberts Rules*.

We were also struck by the innovative approaches to short-term, project-based engagement that are included in the adopted *2014 LUT Guidelines*. However, these two guides (the *CPO Handbook* and the *LUT Guidelines*) were created by two different parties (one external-OSU Extension, and the other internal – County planning staff) and

addressed to two different audiences (CPO's for long-term engagement and the LUT guide for short-term projects); there was no cross-fertilization.

- Relationships in the community are more likely to be shared among government programs and projects. The City of Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement Coordinator, Paul Leistner, suggests that just as the sharing of community engagement values, skills, and experiences becomes easier when all of the community engagement programs are staffed within government, so too, is the sharing of relationships that various governmental agencies build with communities.
- Government is more accountable. When community engagement programs are staffed internally, because government has a greater degree of direct control over how resources are spent (the level of support, where that support goes, and how it is spent) the public is, potentially, more able to see the intentionality and commitment that government has to public engagement and collaboration. By its choices, government is instrumental in either enabling or preventing productive engagement and creative problem-solving among community members.

### **Implementation and Organizational Change**

Leistner, in his extensive 2013 review of the literature on civic engagement, found that many researchers identified changing the culture of local government as an essential factor in creating successful long-term community engagement participation programs. He references an article by Sergio Fernandez and Hal Rainey entitled, "Managing Successful Organizational Change in the Public Sector" (2006) that finds "remarkable similarities" among the various approaches to institutionalizing change. Fernandez and Rainey distill the ingredients down to the following eight factors:

- Ensure the need. Make sure that internal and external stakeholders understand and generally agree that a change is needed and offer a vision/image of the future about where the change might lead.
- Provide a plan. Develop a course of action and timeline and communicate it widely. Include clear goals and coherent cause and effect logic.
- Build internal support for change. Engage in a participatory way with internal and external stakeholders to present the need, vision and plan. Address and incorporate reasonable changes or refinements that address real concerns.
- Ensure top management support and commitment. Ensure that leadership is prepared to be the champion for change.
- Build external support. Leadership can play a key role in championing the new way of doing business with external stakeholders.
- Provide resources. "[C]hange is not cheap or without trade-offs. Planned organizational change involves a redeployment of redirection of scarce organizational resources toward a host of new activities" (p. 172).
- Institutionalize change. "To make the change enduring, members of the organization must incorporate the new policies or innovations into their daily routines...so that new patterns of behavior displace old ones" (p. 172).

- Pursue comprehensive change. Ensure that the change goes deeper than changing just one subsystem or department and instead touches many departments, perhaps some in more fundamental ways than others.

It was anticipated that putting in place a new kind of community participation program would represent a major change for Washington County, and that any significant change would affect the ways in which the county departments do their business.

### **Transition Team’s Recommendations**

Over a period of six months (July 2015-December 2015), the 13-member Transition Team (comprised of community-based representatives, including CPO representation, and public engagement specialists from various departments in the County) used the roadmap as a guide for digging more deeply into each big topic to determine its recommendations to the County Commission. The deliberations were facilitated by Solid Ground Consulting. It was determined at the beginning of their deliberations that they would not have to come to consensus about single recommendations on single topics but could offer more than one option if there was enough support in the group to do so.

As a part of the process, they developed an aspirational vision for the County’s long-term community engagement program that stresses inclusiveness and meaningful engagement:

*Washington County provides opportunities for all residents, businesses, and other stakeholders to meaningfully engage in collaborative, dynamic processes of open and responsive government. People from all walks of life have direct access to information and services, have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, and lend their knowledge, perspective, and creativity to building community resiliency and solving community problems. County officials value their input and take it into account in decision-making. The County partners with other jurisdictions and community-based organizations. Members of the public have opportunities for civic education and leadership training. (Hertzberg and Van Houten, 2015)*

What is clear from this aspirational vision is that it was the intent of the team to nudge Washington County’s future program a little more toward the community-building side of the public participation (jurisdiction initiated agenda)/community building (community initiated agenda) continuum (figure 5).

To get a better sense of the component parts of community participation in the Washington County context, the Transition Team created what they called an “architecture” for community participation that indicates how the various elements could work together in an integrated and adaptable fashion (Hertzberg and Van Houten, 2015) (figure 6).

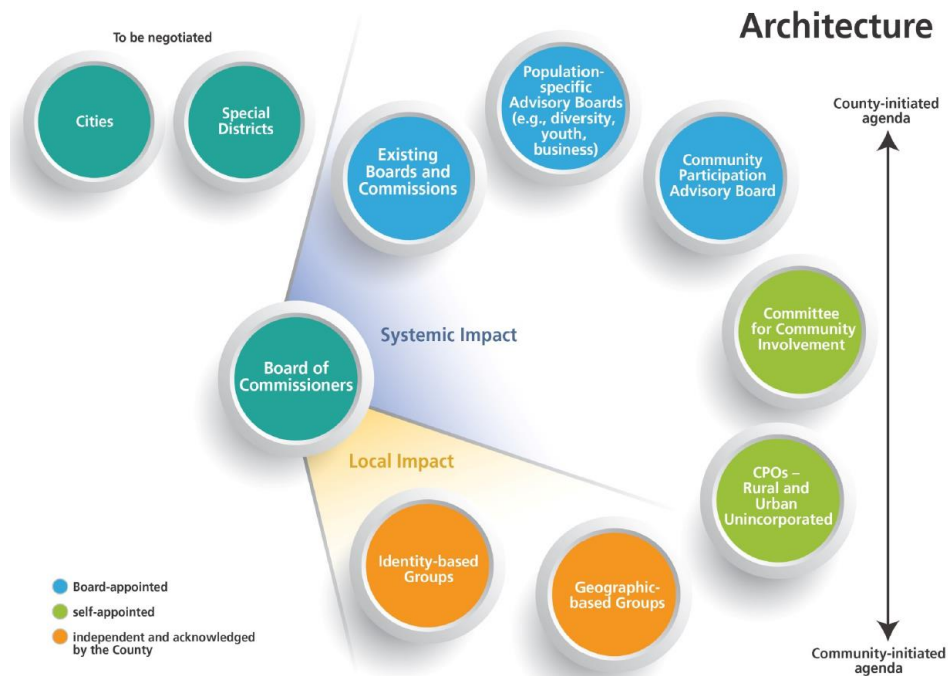


Figure 6. Architecture for community participation (Hertzberg and Van Houten, 2015)

## Specific Recommendations

### *Engaging Communities of Interest and Identity*

Perhaps one of the most significant changes that was recommended by the Transition Team is the recognition of the non-geographic aspects of community: identity and/or interest. This is important because many of these communities have been underrepresented in the CPO system. The Team suggested that it wouldn't be enough simply to invite these communities to participate but it would be imperative to practice "assertive engagement" with them – meaning going to them and speaking their language, identifying natural networks and community leaders, identifying issues that matter to them, encouraging community members to tell their stories, and listen among other approaches. The Transition Team also recommended that new population-specific advisory boards be formed to provide guidance and perspective to the County Commission (Hertzberg and Van Houten, 2015).

### *Engaging Communities of Geography*

Communities of geography (although somewhat arbitrarily established) were the bedrock of the CPO system. The Transition Team strongly recommended that that system should be maintained (but with the enhancements described above) and should continue to address land use and transportation issues. However, they indicated that livability concerns, especially place-based livability concerns, were also important and appropriate for the CPOs to engage in, and that these issues could help engage more people. The Team also suggested that the CPOs should be encouraged to work on community projects such as community gardens, emergency preparedness, community events, and libraries.



While our research indicated that smaller boundaries that reflect a real sense of community, either of attributes of place or identity, have the potential to increase community members' participation in public processes, the Transition Team came to the conclusion that the kind of nesting neighborhood/district system that the City of Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement has (in the CPO context, these geographically smaller communities would nest into the larger CPO boundaries) would place too much of a burden on volunteers and simply be too costly for the County to undertake.

The Transition Team did recommend that the County negotiate with each city to determine how their residents will be included in the County's community engagement program and to negotiate with the special service districts to determine the most effective and efficient forms of collaboration (Hertzberg and Van Houten, 2015).

### *Education and Training*

Many people are confused about the roles and responsibilities of government and county government in particular. The Team suggested that a "Local Government 101" course that helps community members understand which jurisdictions provide which services, the role of community members in government decision-making processes and how people can get involved would be beneficial to most everyone. The Team also recommended that more specialized training should be available for people who are already active in topics such as land use, transportation, services, and equity. Recognizing that leadership is a skill, they recommended that leadership training also be provided, including how to run an effective meeting, how to testify, active listening, leadership styles, and public meeting requirements. Importantly, the Team recommended that the County consider partnering with the cities and special districts to create a comprehensive education and training program (Hertzberg and Van Houten, 2015).

### *Toolkit for Communication, Collaboration, Meetings and Decision-making*

Recognizing that there is no single tool that works for every situation, and that no digital tool can replace the face-to-face meeting experience, the Transition Team recommended a toolkit approach that include both traditional public engagement methods (such as open houses, presentations, community meetings, and community events) and digital online options such as websites, E-subscriptions, email and e-newsletters, online surveys/polls, social media, and online videos.

Given the rapid development of new digital tools for engagement and the reality that these tools must comply with the County's systems, the Team is reviewing these for consideration.

### *Information, Referral, and Troubleshooting*

Although the Transition Team didn't have time to address access to information in depth, believing that effective participation is dependent on access to accurate and timely information, it made the following recommendations:

- (1) A single point of contact. The County should create an Information & Referral function to connect community members with the appropriate staff person when questions arise.

- (2) A “no wrong door” policy. Staff throughout the County are trained and oriented to assist community members, who have questions, to the appropriate staff.
- (3) An ombudsperson. There should be a designated staff person dedicated to ensuring that community members’ questions get answers and problems get resolved.

### *Internal or External Staffing of the Program*

While the Team members saw the pros and cons of both internal and external staffing of the program, it suggested that the staffing for the County’s community engagement program should most likely be some of both, rather than the current system which has been staffed entirely by Oregon State Extension. The Transition Team did not attempt to parse out the assignment of tasks and responsibilities, but instead recommended that a cost-benefit analysis be done to best determine how these assignments should be allocated.

After considering the Transition Team’s recommendation, the County explored the possibility of outsourcing the administration of the program to Portland State University, Pacific University, and the Vision Action Network. While all of these organizations expressed an interest in providing education and training, none of them thought that the administrative role was appropriate for them to take on. On March 1, 2016, Robert Davis, the Washington County Administrator, released a memorandum stating that the County had concluded that the best home for the CPO administrative support would be within the County and that it would be housed in the County Administrative Office (CAO) for the following reasons:

- The County’s Administrative Office has broad organizational responsibility and a county-wide perspective both internally and externally;
- The CAO has visibility, identity and neutrality;
- It has clear lines of authority for program ownership, responsibility and accountability;
- It has opportunities to leverage resources from across the organization and create efficiencies through coordination and alignment with other related initiatives such as the County’s compliance plan under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. (Davis et al., 2016)

Furthermore, the memo states that the County’s budget for fiscal year 2016-2017 will include a new budget unit for community engagement in addition to the already existing budget. The major components of the increased budget are: (1) a full-time (1FTE) program manager for a total of 4 FTE employees to oversee and manage the program and be a lead person for community engagement efforts according to the Transition Team’s aspirations and recommendations; and one-time costs for the transition related to technology and equipment as well as resources for contracting for any additional professional assistance and expertise as needed (Davis et al., 2016).

### **Remaining Issues**

Because there was no existing model of county-level public involvement that fit Washington County’s situation, it had to dig deeply into many of the structural and implementation issues that the existing community engagement program brought to light. And in so doing, the

Transition Team was able to develop a plan to build on the program's strengths and attempt to address many of its weaknesses. Although it was able to accomplish a great deal in six months, there are a number of remaining issues that will need to be addressed during the planning phase of this project – not the least of which is funding. The Transition Team was keenly aware of this and outlined what they saw as significant remaining issues with their recommendations. They include: (1) the issue of sequencing – how and when will the different elements of community participation be introduced to the public? (2) How should the representatives of communities of identity and interest be selected to serve on the County's Community Involvement advisory committee? (3) What will the negotiations with the cities and special districts look like and what will they achieve? (4) How can guidelines for CPO boundaries be established that largely leave rural geographies as is, divide urban unincorporated areas into smaller CPOs, and decide how city geographies are recognized. And, (5) How much will this cost and what should be included in the budget for the new program? (Hertzberg and Van Houten, 2015).

County Administrator, Davis, concluded his March 1<sup>st</sup> memorandum with the following hopeful statement:

*We [the County] accept and look forward to the challenge that lies ahead, and to the tremendous opportunity we have to build upon the foundation that OSU has established and the guidance the Transition Team has provided, to build an even better community engagement program in Washington County.*

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