San Antonio Area Foundation
Where Giving and Community Connect

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC AT THE LOCAL LEVEL TO STRENGTHEN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

Government is effective when the public is engaged in electing officials and holding them accountable. Beyond voting, civic engagement encompasses a wide array of activities that strengthen community including charitable giving, volunteerism and participating in community organizations. Social connectedness– interacting with and trusting neighbors and family – is another important marker of civic engagement. Those with strong familial and neighborhood ties are more active in civic life.

Yet, Texas ranks among the lowest in the nation on a number of measures of civic and political participation. According to the Texas Civic Health Index, voting rates are alarmingly low. Few Texans report that they contacted or met with a public official and only about one-fourth discuss politics with friends. Although not as low as political participation, Texas ranks somewhat lower in volunteerism and charitable giving as compared to other states. Finally, Texans are more likely to help their neighbors, but less likely to trust their neighbors.

San Antonio, like Texas, falls short on civic engagement measures. Data retrieved from the Corporation for National Service's Volunteering and Civic Life in America suggests the following about the civic health of San Antonio residents:

➢ Voting: 12.6% rarely vote in local elections and 42.8% never vote in local elections
➢ Contacting public officials: 12.0% of residents contact or visit public officials
➢ Volunteerism: 25.1% volunteer ranking San Antonio 34th among 51 other metropolitan statistical areas
➢ Organization membership: 6.5% participate in a service or civic association; 17.3% participate in a church group or religious association
➢ Social connectedness: 83.1% eat dinner with family a few times a week, 68.4% do favors for neighbors

Lastly, the need to strengthen civic engagement in San Antonio was affirmed by residents during a community-wide visioning process. In 2007, the Mayor's Office convened and surveyed thousands of residents to create a collective vision for the city. The effort yielded SA2020, a plan that identified eleven areas to be strengthened if San Antonio was to become a world-class city. One of these areas called for strengthening civic engagement and government accountability.

BUIILDING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

One way to foster a civic culture in San Antonio is to engage residents in local government. As residents become involved, they learn how government functions and better understand their civic responsibilities. At the same time, local government is more responsive when residents engage in decision-making and problem solving. Trust in government is strengthened when residents are invited to participate and government responds.

Indeed, municipal officials are experimenting with strategies to strengthen public engagement -- city hall web sites, community surveys, neighborhood councils, online forums, participatory budgets, town hall meetings and community-wide visioning processes. The aforementioned SA2020 is one example. While these efforts require time, energy and resources, *effective* public engagement offers a number of benefits:

➢ creates a shared purpose and builds community as residents take ownership for their neighborhoods
➢ taps into citizen power, knowledge and creativity to inform policymakers and solve complex issues
➢ results in smarter policies and programs that are more likely to have broad public support

> promotes cooperation as diverse groups meet, share experiences, deliberate and over time, develop mutual respect
> ensures marginalized voices have a place at the table

STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Create Space for Democratic Engagement
> Help faith communities, parent-teacher associations and neighborhood organizations become more inclusive, effective and participatory
> Build or re-vamp public spaces such as schools, libraries and community centers that can serve as hubs
> Create neighborhood councils with diverse representation to identify and address community needs

Build the Public Engagement Skills of Employees and Residents
> Provide training for the public, perhaps in partnership with a university or community-based agency
> Hire staff with engagement competencies and provide ongoing professional development
> Augment staff skills by using facilitators, mediators and consultants

Involve All Residents
> Tap into civic and community-based agency networks to reach the public, especially the under-engaged
> Involve young people in meaningful ways and recruit traditional and non-traditional leaders
> Address – don't ignore -- any history of excluding under-engaged groups to re-build trust

Improve Public Decision-Making and Problem Solving
> Use participatory formats for city council and other meetings in traditional and non-traditional settings
> Utilize dialogue and deliberation to address key issues and reach decisions
> Create incentives to encourage residents to generate ideas and solutions

Use Technology to Create a Public Commons
> Use web-based platforms, online forums, social media, interactive tools and smartphone technology to disseminate data, obtain feedback, hold community conversations and strengthen access to services
> Make public information and government records accessible online
> Create systems that allow residents to receive updates on issues and services that concern them

Evaluate Efforts
> Track and measure efforts against goals, then adjust as needed
> Share success stories and lessons learned to build support for engagement and strengthen the field

Foster a Culture of Public Engagement
> Make public engagement an ongoing practice and community priority
> Encourage residents to volunteer and serve boards of local commissions and nonprofit agencies

MODELS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Neighborhood Block Leader Program in Cupertino, California links residents to municipal government. Residents are recruited and trained to serve as block leaders. They share neighborhood concerns with city leaders and disseminate city information to neighbors.

Hartford, Connecticut's Parent Leadership Training Institute is a 20-week program that trains parents to be advocates, to participate in decision-making processes and to understanding budgets and policymaking. Herndon, Virginia's Neighborhood Resource Center is a physical hub that houses nonprofit and government services. The facility includes a learning center, meeting space, computer lab and resource library.

Portsmouth, New Hampshire's study circles rely on dialogue and deliberation to enable diverse residents to work jointly to solve complex problems. After study circles yielded positive results on three occasions, city leaders used the model to involve residents in creating the city's 10-year plan.

Santa Cruz, California launched an interactive web site to educate the public about the budget crisis and to invite the public to offer cost-cutting suggestions. The top 10 suggestions helped guide the budget process. The effort generated more feedback than traditional means and led to public-support for cost-cutting measures.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

A 2009 survey found that municipal leaders value public engagement and use a number of strategies to get people involved; however, they were often dissatisfied with the level or nature of public engagement in their cities. Public ambivalence and difficulty reaching some segments of the community were two significant barriers preventing public engagement. Almost half of the respondents, moreover, reported that municipal leaders and residents alike lacked the skills and knowledge for effective deliberative public engagement.

Indeed, public engagement initiatives often have limitations. Efforts are often episodic and tied to a specific policy debate rather than an ongoing commitment to working with the public. Vocal groups may thwart measures to ensure that all have a voice and push for policies that favor their interests. While technology is an important tool for making information accessible, some argue that it should enhance, not replace, face-to-face contact. Finally, public trust will erode if local governments invite, but fail to consider resident feedback.

PROGRAMS STRENGTHENING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS IN SAN ANTONIO

Masters Leadership Program – prepares local leaders to serve on boards or commissions http://www.mlpsa.org

Public Allies – builds diverse, civic-minded leaders through nonprofit apprenticeships - www.publicallies.org

SA2020 – now a nonprofit agency that coordinates efforts to meet the citywide vision - http://www.sa2020.org

San Antonio Police Department Citizen's Academy – promotes community awareness through citizen participation – http://www.sanantonio.gov/SAPD/CitizenParticipationPrograms.aspx 6

UTSA College of Public Policy – lead partner for SA2020 civic engagement vision area - http://copp.utsa.edu/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

America*Speaks* – http://americaspeaks.org/
The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life - http://communication.utexas.edu/strauss
Deliberative Democracy Consortium – http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/
National Conference on Citizenship – http://www.ncoc.net/index.php?
The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement - www.civicyouth.org
National Action Civics Collaborative – http://actioncivicscollaborative.org/
National League of Cities (NLC) – http://www.nlc.org/
Technology of Participation (ToP) Facilitation Methods, The Institute of Cultural Affairs in the U.S.A. - http://www.ica-usa.org/?page=topfacilitator2

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