

Appreciation of metropolitan community engagement processes

In 2003, Sarkissian Associates Planners undertook a study to review the consultation processes of municipalities in Australia and overseas, focusing on the precise methodologies used.

This study revealed a number of recommendations relevant to conducting community engagement processes, summarised below.

- **A CONFIDENT START:** Successful processes have a high profile from the start which serves to raise awareness and build public confidence in the integrity of the process. Initial expectations must be matched by reality.
- **STABLE SUPPORT:** Stable political support, management support and skilful and enthusiastic practitioners are much stronger predictors of success than the specific consultation methodologies employed.
- **HIGH-LEVEL COMMITMENT:** Success requires total commitment from politicians and total and enthusiastic commitment and cooperation from senior management of the main municipal departments. They should be committed not only to listening to the various communities identified, but also to ensuring that the resulting plan reflects the community's wishes. On no account should a community consultation program be commenced if this required degree of support is not present.
- **PRELIMINARY AND ONGOING RESEARCH:** Research is also important to complement participatory processes. A survey of residents is often used to determine community values to contribute to the development of a vision and the resulting strategies and actions.
- **FINANCIAL RESOURCES:** Allocating adequate resources to pursue relevant research and gather intelligence about planning issues is a hallmark of effective processes.
- **CLEAR PROGRAMS:** Effective processes begin and proceed with clear programs that incorporate realistic timeframes. Community information that clearly explains where this stage in the process fits into the wider consultation strategy is essential. Timeframes also relate to the target year that is chosen for visioning processes. Providing adequate time for reflection may also have the effect of helping to defray underlying cynicism, as rushed processes are always treated with suspicion.
- **DIVERSITY OF PARTICIPANTS:** The consultation models used by innovative communities place a clear emphasis on diversity and representativeness of participants, and include community representatives, industry, academic and research representatives and a wide range of "experts" on the issues under discussion. Where reference groups are used, they must be carefully chosen for representativeness, be fully resourced and then listened to and not ignored in the final analysis.
- **INCREMENTAL APPROACHES:** Successful models include opportunities to incorporate consultation outcomes that have a strong community mandate into ongoing planning processes in the early stages, so that it is not necessary to wait to the very end before anything can be implemented.
- **MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS:** The detail and specificity of concerns and suggestions from community members must be presented in reports and resulting plans with their integrity intact if community confidence in the process is to be maintained.
- **VISIONING:** Visioning processes serve a dual function of being accessible and interesting to a wide range of community members and stakeholders, thus increasing the breadth of community involvement; and harnessing collective energy to produce a clear vision which generally has wide support and thus offers opportunities for efficient and participatory implementation.

- **CREATIVE APPROACHES:** Successful approaches have the capacity to catch the public's imagination and allow them to engage their creative sides. Even when a planning approach focuses primarily on the collection of community indicators ("data"), processes are strengthened by using a range of methods, including creative visioning approaches.
- **COMMUNITY INDICATORS:** Leading practice models combine the views of citizens with hard data about their communities. Some of the more innovative models incorporate an exploration, from the community's perspective, of a wide range of community indicators that are seen to reflect human health and wellbeing, ecosystem health and economic strength.
- **COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING:** The lessons of the effective experiences of consultation highlight the indisputable importance of community education and community capacity building within a wide community.
- **PARTICIPATION BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE:** Effective processes fully involved all age groups and developed tailor-made strategies for children and young people, which were both culturally appropriate and involved a significant community education component.
- **ECOSYSTEMS APPROACHES** reflect a deep understanding of both local and global parameters of sustainability and an "ecosystems" approach to planning and consultation. Links with neighbourhoods, regions, states and provinces, and national and international jurisdictions are clearly articulated and conscious trans-boundary partnerships are formed and maintained.
- **SUSTAINABILITY:** Almost all successful models focus to some extent on sustainability (seen as much more than environmental care). However, often the sustainability focus does not extend to the culture and the social dimension is often poorly articulated, leading to an impression that "scientific" sustainability indicators could be guiding the model.
- **WIDE RANGE OF APPROACHES AND TECHNIQUES:** Successful consultation processes have not relied on only one method but have combined the following: surveys, visioning processes, forums, open houses (a staffed exhibition where comments can be recorded), websites, capacity-building seminars and other processes, conferences hosted by senior politicians, advisory committees, newsletters and bulletins, tailor-made material for use with children and young people and expert contributions (such as discussion papers).