

BUILDING LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A Survey of the Field of Practice in Oregon

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides the summary of our project that investigated the ways that local governments build their capacity for community engagement. Two compendia, two appendices, and a longer version of the report are available separately.

The project included an extensive review of the literature which provided a conceptual analysis of the components of community engagement capacity, identified the characteristics of robust programs, and highlighted the skills required to be effective in community engagement. Based on this literature review, we identified a spectrum of institutional capacity that we used as our project framework. The review also included the exemplary practices around the world. The summary of the literature review and comparative framework for analyzing community engagement is available in the compendium to this report entitled "[Compendium 1: Building Capacity for Community Engagement.](#)"

The main purpose of this project is to identify what activities are taking place at the local level in Oregon, particularly in local governments, to develop skills, knowledge, and organizational capacities for developing, implementing, and sustaining effective community engagement programs. The project team conducted interviews with experts working in this field, and more than thirty government staff, elected officials and practitioners. We also collected information through websites and other document sources. Based on that information collected, we explored the paths that local governments in Oregon are taking to build their capacity. We identified sources of outside support such as education, training, consultation, and peer networks. We also identified specific examples of community engagements from various local jurisdictions.

This project also identified service providers for community engagement capacity building. Another compendium to this report "[Compendium 2: The Field of Practice in Oregon](#)" lists the service providers and resources with brief descriptions, plus an empirical survey of course offerings and degree programs in Oregon related to community engagement, and a description of some of the consultants and online service providers we heard about. By all means, this is not an exhaustive list but our intent is to use this list to start developing a descriptive database of organizations that offer support to local governments. This section highlights examples of community engagement that we discovered through interviews with more than thirty government staff, elected officials, and practitioners.

Our key findings are:

- Local governments in all parts of Oregon do outstanding work to engage their communities.
- Community engagement is an emerging field that is rapidly changing.
- There is a need and desire among local governments for more support around community engagement.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is central to community engagement.
- Local governments benefit from bringing more voices into the public process.
- Community engagement is an evolving field of practice, and local governments face emerging challenges often propelled by changing demographics.
- Local governments in Oregon have diverse needs, so it is critical that any training or consultation be carefully tailored to the circumstances of each jurisdiction.
- While valuable where available, formal training is not necessarily the primary means of capacity building for local governments. Rather, it is more common for government officials to build their skills and capacity through peer sharing, mentoring, conferences, professional networks, community relationships, lived experience, and other sources of learning and support.
- Consistent leadership support and resource investment are essential to building and sustaining capacity for community engagement.

- There are opportunities for partnerships between rural governments and public universities.
- State and federal governments are potentially valuable sources of support to local governments.

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INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is universally recognized as a vital skill for local government leaders. There is a wide field of study and practice related to community engagement and public participation. The main purpose of this project is to identify what activities are taking place at the local level in Oregon, particularly in local governments, to develop skills, knowledge, and organizational capacities for developing, implementing and sustaining effective community engagement programs.

By “local government” we mean **cities, counties, and special districts**, each of which has different needs and priorities but all of which seek to engage the communities they serve. We offer this report as an exploratory study pointing to areas for further research and possible action. We do not analyze or endorse the quality of the services provided by organizations, consultants, or trainers. We simply identify some of the opportunities available to local governments.

To the extent possible, we describe the content of the programs and curricula we discovered, but we do not evaluate them individually or collectively (for example, whether they actually help to build capacity or advance equity). Our study is normative only to the extent that we assume it is beneficial for local governments to empower their community members to participate in decision making. We strongly encourage further research to assess the effectiveness of various approaches to achieving this goal.

We started with a simple question: *Where are local governments in Oregon getting training for community engagement?* With this question in mind, we started interviewing local government representatives and community engagement practitioners.

The project has several goals:

- Highlight efforts by local governments in Oregon that aim to strengthen their capacity for community engagement.
- Discover the pathways and mechanisms by which local government staff and elected officials acquire the skills to do community engagement.
- Identify organizations throughout the state that provide services to help local governments build their capacity; and
- Learn what kind of additional support local governments need and want.

The questions that framed this project are:

- What are local governments doing to build their capacity, why are they doing it, who helps them, and what have been the results?
- What does the comparative literature (worldwide and national) have to say about local government capacity building for community engagement?
- What are the characteristics and components of a robust community engagement program?
- What are the skills required to be effective?
- How do local governments in Oregon build their capacity for community engagement?
- Who provides training and support for community engagement in Oregon?
- What are the content and methods by which this support is delivered?
- How do Oregon colleges and universities contribute to government capacity (through education, skill building, and certification)?
- What kinds of additional training and support do local governments need?
- What can we learn from local government efforts at capacity building (success factors, challenges, lessons for other jurisdictions)?

We also conducted this project and reviewed the information in relation to the larger issue of equity, which we consider to be the defining feature of legitimate community engagement. Equity is the broader category, encompassing all aspects of how government does its work: legal requirements, organizational culture, policies and programs, daily operations, and external support from consultants and trainers. Community engagement is one channel to pursue equity in government. Processes to engage the community should be equitable and inclusive, and the evaluation of government efforts should take account of whether these processes lead to equitable outcomes.

This project is exploratory. It points to future research and collaborative work. The more we learned, the more we appreciated the many ways that organizations and individuals see community engagement as vital to local governance. For each person we interviewed, we were referred to others. For each jurisdiction we studied, we heard about more.

In the spirit of exploration, this is not an exhaustive study of community engagement by local governments in Oregon. Instead, we offer it as a milestone to describe and advance a coherent field of practice that is not always recognized as such by those who are working locally. We want to acknowledge innovative work in communities large and small and provide a point of reference for further research and practice.

This project was supported by a grant from the Mark O. Hatfield Public Service Grant Program. The report is part of a larger initiative at PSU that includes the Center for Public Service, the National Policy Consensus Center (NPCC), and the Department of Public Administration to enhance the engagement capacity of state and local agencies and community organizations.

WHY DOES COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MATTER?

There is a principled case and a practical case.

A **principled case** for engagement stresses the essential role of public participation in a democratic society. Community members deserve to be involved in the decisions that affect them. Depending on the jurisdiction and issue, they might also have a legal right to participate in decision making in specific ways. Aside from legal requirements, the government obligation to engage the public in decision making can be justified as ethical and right, and it is required by various professional codes of ethics, including those of the [American Institute of Certified Planners \(AICP\)](#)¹ and the [International City/County Management Association \(ICMA\)](#).²

¹ The AICP “provides the only nationwide, independent verification of planners’ qualifications” and considers its Code of Ethics to be its “superpower.” The first principle: “Our Overall Responsibility to the Public.” Subpoints include: “(d) We shall provide timely, adequate, clear, and accurate information on planning issues to all affected persons and to governmental decision makers; (e) We shall give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence; (f) We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.” The third principle is “Our Responsibility to Our Profession and Colleagues,” which includes, “making work relevant to solutions of community problems, and increasing public understanding of planning activities.” Subpoints: “(b) We shall educate the public about planning issues and their relevance to our everyday lives; (f) We shall contribute time and resources to the professional development of students, interns, beginning professionals, and other colleagues; (g) We shall increase the opportunities for members of underrepresented groups to become professional planners and help them advance in the profession. The AICP is [updating its Code of Ethics](#) in 2021. The American Planning Association offers a [guide to ethical conduct](#) for professional planners in the U.S. based on the AICP Code.

² The ICMA Code of Ethics describes the role of professional management in “democratic local government.” Tenet 4: “Serve the best interest of the people.” Two guidelines to express this tenet: (1) “Impacts of Decisions. Members should inform their governing body of the anticipated effects of a decision on people in their jurisdictions, especially if specific groups may be disproportionately harmed or helped.” (2) “Inclusion. To ensure that all the people within their jurisdiction have the ability to actively engage with their local government, members should strive to eliminate barriers to public involvement in decisions, programs, and services.” Tenet 9: “Keep the community informed on local government affairs; encourage communication between the citizens and all local government officers; emphasize friendly and courteous service to the public; and seek to improve the quality and image of public service.”

Many values are widely cited as measures of legitimate and meaningful public engagement, including equity, transparency, accountability, and early involvement before decisions are made.

A **practical case** for community engagement is grounded in the tangible benefits of involving people in decisions that affect them and avoiding the pitfalls of failing to do so. From the standpoint of government staff and elected officials, the most compelling argument may be that effective community engagement can help them solve problems.³

While it requires an initial commitment of time and resources, an investment in community engagement capacity can benefit government decision makers and staff. It improves relationships and civil discourse, makes public meetings go more smoothly, saves time and money by averting legal challenges, aids project delivery when stakeholders feel heard, and improves the work environment for elected officials and staff members who are the first point of contact with the public.

The practical case for community engagement can be expressed in many ways:⁴

DECISION PROCESSES

- Encourages civil and respectful communication at public meetings
- Reinforces the credibility and legitimacy of government decisions
- Gives elected leaders confidence in the basis for their decisions
- Helps to explain and justify decisions if they are challenged
- Reduces the chance of “blowback” or full-blown crisis

DECISION OUTCOMES

- Results in better, creative decisions by incorporating community knowledge
- Avoids unintended consequences by identifying pitfalls early in the process
- Provides community-level information to validate data-driven decisions
- Identifies partners who can help facilitate project implementation
- Makes decisions more durable and sustainable (more “buy in”)

RELATIONSHIPS

- Promotes mutual respect and constructive (“adult-adult”) conversations
- Improves government officials’ understanding of their communities
- Treats community members and resources as part of the solution
- Builds the credibility and confidence of agency staff
- Fosters public trust in government

PROJECT DELIVERY AND COST

- Supports faster implementation in the long run (“go slow to go fast”)
- Avoids expensive course corrections by getting it right the first time
- Increases understanding of the agency’s work and funding needs
- Prevents damaged relationships from impacting other projects
- Inspires public-private collaboration to solve problems

³ This can create a positive feedback loop. From the standpoint of community members, their participation is worth the effort because the government is listening to them, and the priorities of local leaders align with community priorities. This enhances the legitimacy of governing bodies and reinforces the idea that it is worth the time and effort to engage in government processes.

⁴ These examples of how to express the practical value of community engagement are drawn from the authors’ professional experience and multiple sources, including: Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development ([Putting the People in Planning](#)), City of Portland ([Public Involvement Principles](#)), Nabatchi and Leighninger ([Public Participation for 21st Century Democracies](#)), National League of Cities ([Changing the Way We Govern PDF](#)), Davenport Institute ([workshops](#)), and International Association for Public Participation ([workshops and Core Values](#)).

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

- Inclusive processes make decisions more responsive to community needs
- Equitable processes result in more equitable outcomes for the community
- Resources are focused on those who have not been engaged in the past
- Participants gain the skills and connections to become local leaders
- Engagement builds social bonds and a shared sense of purpose

The deep commitment of local government officials to the well-being of their communities is a bridge between the principled and practical arguments. This is the reason that most people run for office. Elected officials almost always live in the communities they serve, and most staff live in or near the jurisdictions where they work.

If community engagement leads to better problem solving and better outcomes, then the practical case meets the principled case for anyone in government who is committed to getting things done and strengthening their communities in the process.

STATE AND FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

Compliance with state and federal rules is another reason that local governments should be thoughtful about community engagement. Federal and state requirements shape the conditions for community engagement at the local level.

Federal agencies generally require some level of local community engagement for projects they oversee or fund, and federal laws related to equity are broadly applicable to local jurisdictions. Key examples include [Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#), its application to [language access](#), the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#), and the [Freedom of Information Act](#).

The U.S Department of Transportation and the Federal Transit Administration are clear about these requirements. Any Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) that represents local jurisdictions and receives federal transportation funding is expected to develop a [Public Participation Plan](#) that informs its programs and projects.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) gives [guidance to local governments](#) on public participation. The agency has been a leader among federal agencies in applying the basic principles of public participation to decision making at all levels of government. EPA also provides guidance to community members with respect to [environmental justice](#) and the [assessment of environmental impacts](#) for local projects subject to the [National Environmental Policy Act \(NEPA\)](#).

Even when it is not a matter of legal compliance, federal agencies like the [National Park Service](#) provide resources to encourage and support community engagement.

Disaster preparedness is a focus of community engagement for many local governments, often with guidance from the federal government. [Local Emergency Planning Committees \(LEPCs\)](#) are community-based organizations that assist in preparing for emergencies, particularly those concerning hazardous materials. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) [Community Emergency Response Team \(CERT\)](#) program educates volunteers about disaster preparedness for the hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills.

State governments also create the parameters for community engagement through their own laws, programs, and funding requirements. At a minimum, every local government must comply with the state's [public records and meeting law](#). As at the federal level, transportation and other large infrastructure projects have specific requirements. In rural or unincorporated communities, the construction or improvement of a local highway, water line, sewage or drainage system might be

entirely within the jurisdiction of a state agency (or in partnership with a special district). As the lead agency, the state agency oversees the plan and sets the standards for public outreach and engagement.

In Oregon, state law is particularly clear about public participation in local government decision making around land use. The state established its basic goal for “citizen involvement” in land use planning nearly fifty years ago, earning its reputation as a national leader in public participation.⁵

DEFINITIONS

This report does not make a rigorous distinction between commonly used terms in the field. We use some words interchangeably that may have different connotations in certain contexts (e.g., public vs. community, involvement vs. engagement). We use “community engagement” to refer to the commitments and behaviors of local governments to bring those affected by government action into the decision-making process. At a minimum, the purpose is to keep the community informed. More ambitiously, it is to increase public participation and influence.

We acknowledge that various terms can be used to describe a spectrum of engagement and participation based on the scope and purpose of those activities. We use “community engagement” most often in this report because (a) it is widely used in Oregon, (b) the valid discussions about terms do not bear directly on the substance of our empirical research, and (c) the words “community” and “engagement” are broadly inclusive of practices at the local level (avoiding, for example, a narrower reference to “citizens” and considering “outreach” to be a subset of “engagement”).

We distinguish “community engagement” from “civic engagement.” Civic engagement encompasses a broader range of participation by community members in public life (e.g., civic-oriented groups or community events), as well as a wider field of inquiry. “Civic engagement” relates to the subject of this report insofar as local governments can and do take intentional actions to promote it (“community building”), and because the strength of civic bonds and the capacity of community members to advocate for their own interests affect the government’s capacity to engage the public.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted interviews with national and international experts to help frame the research and identify broad trends and practices in the field.

We also interviewed people working in government (staff and elected officials), universities, professional associations, consulting firms, and community organizations. They gave their time generously and pointed us to a wealth of information and resources. We also sent a survey to neighborhood program coordinators at local governments in the Pacific Northwest through the Regional Area Neighborhood Coordinators (RANC) network.

Concurrently we conducted a literature review to capture the global field of study and practice on building local government capacity for community engagement, including an inventory of major organizations that work in the field beyond Oregon (Compendium 1). We also explored academic programs in North America that offer degree programs focused on community engagement, and we identified programs and coursework at public universities in Oregon that offer educational resources related to community engagement (Compendium 2).

⁵ OAR 660-015-0000(1), <https://www.oregon.gov/lcd/OP/Documents/goal01.pdf>. See also <https://www.oregon.gov/lcd/OP/Pages/Goal-1.aspx>.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Engaging the community in local decision-making requires specific skills, knowledge, and experience, as well as an organizational culture that supports this work.

We first established the basic concepts, values, and characteristics of good community engagement. We then identified the activities, projects, and programs that could make up a robust local government community engagement program and culture.

As we interviewed people working in this field, we quickly realized that they gain useful knowledge in a variety of ways and from a broad array of different sources and providers—not just traditional training programs. We expanded the scope of our study to focus not only on how local jurisdictions develop skills in individuals but also the organizational capacity to support and sustain this work.

This section discusses (1) the various ways that local government staff, elected officials, and consultants build their skills; (2) the specific skills and knowledge that help local governments create and implement effective community engagement programs; (3) the many different categories of providers and mechanisms that help individuals gain this knowledge and build their capacity.

APPROACHES TO SKILL BUILDING

Local government leaders and staff develop effective community engagement skills and capacity in different ways—often not through traditional training workshops.

- **Participation in Training Workshops/Courses/Webinars**—attending short sessions, traditional part-day or multi-day workshops and training courses.
- **Partnerships with skilled community engagement consultants**—working with consultants who model community engagement strategies and best practices and techniques.
- **Partnerships with community-based organizations**—learning how to engage specific communities effectively, respectfully, and equitably by partnering with organizations grounded in the lived experience of each of these communities.
- **Personal experiences with community engagement successes and failures**—development of skills and knowledge over time through personal experience with processes and projects that work well and those that struggle or fail.
- **Peer Learning**—participating in formal and informal networks of professional peers who work with the community, either within or across the departments of a single jurisdiction, or networks of peers across different jurisdictions that share practical knowledge, advice, support, and resources.
- **Resources from Other Organizations**—Guides, toolkits, and manuals for a wide variety of practices and processes, developed by other public agencies or by organizations devoted to supporting local governments.

TRAINING AND SKILL CATEGORIES

A broad range of skills and knowledge can help support effective community engagement design, planning, and implementation.

GENERAL SKILLS:

- Basic Principles and Values of Community Engagement
- Planning and Process Design for Outreach and Engagement
- Community Demographics, Data Collection, and Asset Mapping
- Culturally Appropriate Engagement (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Access)

SPECIFIC SKILLS:

- **Evaluation**—Developing evaluation systems to measure not just programmatic activity but also outcomes of community engagement.
- **Communications**—Utilizing effective communication strategies for reaching the full diversity of the community in different situations, including in-person, print, social media, etc.
- **Meeting Facilitation**—Designing effective meeting and using facilitation strategies and techniques to ensure meetings are productive and participants feel respected and heard.
- **Dispute Resolution**—Employing strategies and techniques for helping parties work through conflicts and seek a constructive path forward.
- **Appreciative Inquiry/Appreciative Organizing**—Using “dialogue, listening, storytelling, community networks, social bonding, and leadership” to design and lead “meaningful community engagement initiatives that result in transformative partnerships.”⁶
- **Online tools**—Using digital engagement techniques and tools to communicate and share information with and gather input from the public.
- **Advisory Committees**—Creating and supporting diverse and productive participation by community members on local government boards, commissions, and advisory committees.
- **Working with Consultants**—Understanding how to choose a community engagement consultant, how to write and administer a good contract and, and how to work with the consultant to the benefit of the local government and the community.
- **Working with Vulnerable People or People with Challenging Behaviors**—Knowing how to work effectively with people who are angry and hostile or are experiencing a wide variety of trauma and/or mental health issues.
- **Volunteer Management and Recognition**—Recruiting, supporting, and recognizing the good work of community volunteers.
- **Community Grant Programs**—Developing and administering effective community grant programs that encourage participation by the full diversity of the community and build capacity in community leaders and organizations.
- **Community Leadership Academies**—Creating and supporting community leadership academies that raise awareness of how government works and help community members build strong leadership skills.
- **Building Strong Relationships with Community-Based Organizations**—Creating and administering effective programs to engage, strengthen the capacity of, and build relationships with organizations that represent both geographic communities (e.g. Neighborhood Associations/Councils) and ethnic and cultural identity community organizations.
- **Deliberative Community Dialogues**—Designing and supporting deliberative dialogues that bring community members together to address complex issues.
- **Accessibility/ADA training**—Making processes and events accessible to people with a range of different disabilities.
- **Community Visioning**—Developing strategies and techniques for engaging the community in developing a shared vision to guide future strategic planning, program development, and evaluation.
- **Community Strategic Planning**—Engaging the community in developing a strategy to achieve the community’s shared vision, accomplish specific goals, or support community revitalization.
- **Comprehensive Planning**—Engaging the community in developing and reviewing State-mandated, long-range plans for the jurisdiction’s land use, housing, transportation, economic development, natural resources and other major areas of local government responsibility.

⁶ Shelly Parini, “Appreciative Organizing: Charting a Course for Community Engagement,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015), 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/ijps.v2i2.115>.

- **Participatory Budgeting**— Engaging a diversity of community members in democratic deliberation and decision-making to discuss, set priorities and determine how to spend a specific pot of funding set aside by a local government.
- **Effective Formal Notification**— Increasing the likelihood that formal required notification of local government decisions and actions will reach the affected community members.

TYPES OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

Local government leaders and staff in Oregon can get support in strengthening their community engagement skills and capacity from many types of providers. In this section, we list generic categories of providers that we identified through our research and interviews so that they may be useful to the field in general. We also identify specific resources available in Oregon under each of these categories.

Some provider organizations are national but may also have local affiliates or chapters in Oregon. Local leaders and staff in Oregon who are members of these organizations can access training and capacity building assistance from the national and local entities.

We also identified several organizations that may not offer support to local governments now but could do so in the future. For instance, some state agencies have regional field offices and staff that already provide technical support to local governments.

The categories of providers we identified:

- Community Engagement Trainers
- Local Government In-House Training
- Local Government Associations
- Councils of Governments and Regional Collaboratives
- Professional Associations
- Municipal Support Organizations
- Consulting Firms
- Academic Institutions
- Community Organizing and Advocacy Groups
- Dialogue and Deliberation
- Equity Organizations
- Online Tool Providers
- Peer Support Networks
- Foundations and Funding Organizations
- Civic Organizations
- Journals and Other Publications
- Research and Information Clearinghouses
- State and Federal Agency Programs

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TRAINERS

Organizations and consultants who offer training and workshops specifically focused on the design and implementation of community engagement strategies, processes, and plans. They may also offer certification programs, conferences, networking opportunities, and other resources.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN-HOUSE TRAINING

Some local governments have developed in-house “Community Engagement 101” and “Equity 101” training programs. Offering this type of training to employees and departments can help local

governments build a common policy framework and common language around values, strategies, tools, and support resources across all departments.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATIONS

Organizations of local government jurisdictions (cities, counties, special districts, school districts) that provide their members with a range of conferences, workshops, webinars, mentoring, resources, and award and recognition programs. There are also organizations that serve specific groups of local elected and appointed leaders (mayors, planning commissioners, members of boards and commissions) that offer conferences, workshops, resources, networking, and peer support.

COUNCILS OF GOVERNMENTS AND REGIONAL COLLABORATIVES

Councils of governments and regional collaboratives are important elements of Oregon's local government infrastructure. Both organizational forms bring together government and other stakeholders to address policy and service issues in their districts and provide a wide range of planning and support services to their participating jurisdictions and direct services to people in their communities.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Organizations that support specific groups of local government professionals (city managers, public works directors, land use planners, transportation planners, utility engineers, local health professionals, emerging leaders, etc.). These organizations offer their members opportunities to attend conferences, workshops and events, learn about new research in their field, continuing education, certification programs, peer networking, mentoring, regular communications, legislative and policy tracking, career support, and recognition and awards for exceptional projects and work.

MUNICIPAL SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

Nonprofit organizations devoted to promoting and supporting good government at the local level, often in collaboration with associations that represent cities, counties, and special districts. They provide local leaders with (generally free) information, tools, webinars, case studies and other resources to build capacity for community engagement. Some organizations provide legal, policy, and programmatic support and advice to local governments on specific challenging issues.

CONSULTING FIRMS

Community Engagement Consultants: Private firms that offer a broad range of services to help local governments design and implement community engagement plans and processes for a wide variety of policy, program, and project activities. They may offer facilitation services for challenging meetings, tailored training for local staff, advice on the development of community engagement policies and programs, and other specialized consultation services.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Consultants: Consultants who work with local governments to build their capacity to engage communities of color and other historically underrepresented communities, and to build the capacity of these communities to have a voice in local decision-making. They may also assist local governments in public relations, facilitating culturally appropriate focus groups and community surveys, helping local government agencies to assess their internal cultures and implement diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

Planning, Engineering, Environmental, and Economic Development Consultants: Some consulting firms have created in-house community engagement teams that can provide community engagement services

to local governments as part of larger engineering, environmental, housing, transportation, or economic development projects.

Public Relations Consultants: Some local governments consult with public relations firms to assist them in engaging the community and other stakeholders around basic communications, project or policy advocacy, and crisis management.

Other Types of Consultants: Other types of consultants also can help local governments build their capacity and effectively engage with their communities through processes like community visioning, strategic planning, and recruitment. See Appendix 3 for some examples of each of these types of consulting firms active in Oregon.

ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Higher Education Degree/Certification Programs and Courses: Some higher education institutions offer degree or certification programs devoted to community engagement. Some subject area programs offer individual courses on community engagement tailored to their specific field (e.g., public administration, land use planning, social work, health care, education, criminal justice). See Appendix 2 for more detail.

Higher Education Academic Institutes: Some higher education institutions are home to policy institutes. Some of these programs offer community engagement research, consulting services, and training workshops. They will often work with local governments to help design and implement community engagement processes.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY GROUPS

A growing number of community-based organizations advocate for the interests of communities based on shared cultural identity. These organizations can be valuable partners to local governments seeking to engage with these communities. It is important to recognize that the mission of these groups is not specifically to help local governments do their work, but to empower their communities. Local governments should be prepared to compensate these organizations for their assistance.

Developing long-term, mutually beneficial partnership relationships between local government and community organizations can advance equitable engagement and help local leaders and staff improve their cultural awareness and culturally appropriate skills. These organizations might see a longer-term benefit from developing community engagement training programs for local government officials and staff that could increase the effectiveness of their own advocacy work.

DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION

Dialogue and Deliberation Trainers/Process Providers: Individuals who offer training, consultation, design and facilitation of deliberative community processes to engage community members in discussing complex and challenging issues.

Dialogue and Deliberation Organizations: Organizations that represent networks of dialogue and deliberation practitioners, public administrators, community activists, researchers, and students, serving as gathering places, resource centers, and sources of news in the field. They champion the use of dialogue and deliberation processes, act as clearinghouses for resources and best practices, and bring people working in the field together to share information and support.

Mediation and Conflict Resolution Organizations: Many states have organizations that support the use of mediation and collaborative conflict resolution processes versus more traditional adversarial approaches. These organizations often provide networking opportunities for mediators, help the community access skilled mediators and facilitators, and support training and volunteer mediation

programs. Some cities also have developed or have partnerships with organizations that provide neighbor-to-neighbor mediation services.

EQUITY ORGANIZATIONS

These organizations serve as networks for governments working to transform their own institutions and partner with others to advance equity in various ways. They share models of effective work and help develop best practices, tools, and resources, support local and regional collaborations, and support national equity movements.

ONLINE TOOL PROVIDERS

Many local governments contract with firms that have developed and support a wide range of online tools for communication and community engagement. These providers often provide training sessions for their government clients to train staff how to use the tools.

PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

Professional peer groups can provide valuable support and information to local government leaders and staff, especially those responsible for community engagement.

Peer Groups within a Single Jurisdiction: When community engagement staff meet and work together, they can help overcome fragmentation and increase the quality and consistency of community engagement across different departments. They can also share valuable information about the community, potential community partners, and effective strategies and techniques.

Peer Groups Across Jurisdictions: When local government leaders and staff from different jurisdictions meet with their peers regularly, they can share valuable resources and lessons learned and help establish expectations for good practice in the field.

Informal Peer Groups: Sometimes peer groups evolve organically when a few people who do similar work decide to create an ad hoc group and share their knowledge and experiences.

FOUNDATIONS AND FUNDING ORGANIZATIONS

Certain philanthropic foundations have identified community engagement, participatory democracy, and community organizing as primary targets of their support and funding. These organizations often act as important conveners who help people doing similar work around the country connect with each other.

CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS

National and local civic organizations encourage community engagement in civic life by bringing people together to work on important issues, community assistance, awards, events, research, and publications.

JOURNALS AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Some journals focus on issues of civic participation and community engagement. They are invaluable resources for articles on new theories and issues, the latest trends and techniques, and case studies of successful practices. Publications by local government organizations and professional associations also publish occasional articles related to community engagement.

RESEARCH AND INFORMATION CLEARINGHOUSES

Many organizations serve as sources of community engagement best practices, research, and case studies.

STATE AND FEDERAL AGENCY PROGRAMS

Some state and federal agencies have programs that include community engagement requirements as part of their policies and funded projects. These agencies span a wide range of subject areas, including land use planning, transportation, public health, environmental protection, environmental justice, housing, economic development, and education. In addition to their headquarters, these agencies typically have field offices with staff who provide technical assistance and work directly with local governments and communities. While these agencies may not currently play a large role in building local government capacity for community engagement, they offer an institutionalized source of support that could have a greater impact based on staffing and funding.

CONCLUSION

Our research validated the advice that launched this project. In February 2020, a group of PSU faculty, staff, students, affiliates, and partners considered a proposal to create a training program on community engagement for local governments in Oregon. The participants in the meeting recommended that we investigate current work in the field before developing any future training curriculum. This project was the result, and we learned much about what local governments are already doing, where they get their support, how they learn, and what they need from service providers.

MAIN FINDINGS

- **Local governments in all parts of Oregon are doing outstanding work to engage their communities.** Public agencies and the people who work for them have a deep commitment to their communities, take advantage of learning opportunities from a variety of sources, hire talented staff, partner with community organizations and universities, work closely with skilled consultants, and find creative solutions to complex problems. This work deserves to be celebrated and the lessons shared for the benefit of other jurisdictions. This is our main finding that confirms the origin of the project and calls for further research.
- **Community engagement is an emerging field that is rapidly changing.** We emphasize the exploratory nature of this project, and our intention to contribute to an evolving field of practice. Since we began our research in February 2020, the landscape for community engagement has been changed dramatically by a global pandemic, a national dialogue about racial justice, and profound concerns about the future of democracy. These conditions directly affect the level of trust in government, relationships among community members, and the challenges faced by local officials as they seek to engage their communities in decision making.
- **There is a need and desire for more support to local governments.** We heard from everyone we interviewed that community engagement is a vital leadership skill. While most public agencies in Oregon are doing their best to engage their communities, nearly all of them could use additional support. While professional associations and consultants provide an array of resources, there is a gap between the support that is needed and what is available.
- **Local governments have diverse needs.** The goals and challenges of community engagement vary based on an agencies' jurisdictional responsibilities (cities, counties, special districts), size, budget, geography, and demographics. For example: Cities and counties are responsible for land use and a wide range of policies, programs, and services. Their public meetings are often well attended, and they receive public feedback on most decisions. In contrast, special districts provide essential services to many people across multiple jurisdictions, but they often must work hard to let people know what they do, why it matters, and how they are funded. Each local government must decide for itself what works for them and their community
- **Local governments learn from other local governments.** Case studies are likely the best way to share best practices across the approximately 300 local jurisdictions in Oregon (cities, counties, special districts). What are our neighbors doing? What works (and what doesn't)? What tools are most useful? What can we learn from others and how can we avoid pitfalls?

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- **Formal training is not the main way that local governments build their capacity.** We learned that government staff and elected officials take many paths to develop the skills they need to engage their communities. Some stories are quite personal, highlighting how lived experience can be a powerful source of an individual's capacity, which in turn benefits the institution that employs them. Peer networks are essential sources of learning, skill development, and personal/professional relationships. Government associations (of cities, counties, special districts, elected

officials) offer regular conferences, webinars, orientations, and mentoring. Professional associations provide standards, guidelines, training, networking, and other support to various categories of government staff. Public universities provide opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to develop community engagement knowledge and skills. All these sources of support help to build local government capacity apart from formal training.

- **Leadership support and resource investment are the keys to building and sustaining local government capacity for community engagement.** A commitment to community engagement by elected officials and executive staff can move an agency toward the kind of organizational culture described in this report as the highest level of capacity building. This commitment is most likely to endure beyond single projects when staff who are primarily responsible for engagement are elevated within the organizational hierarchy (e.g., reporting directly to the city manager or at least having access to agency leadership).
- **Community engagement is most effective and durable when it is integrated into institutional processes.** Adoption of principles, policies, and programs provides clear signals to elected leaders and staff and encourages consistency across the agency's departments and projects. It fosters an organizational culture supportive of public participation, reflected in job descriptions and staff resources. There is a significant difference between an agency that institutionalizes community engagement as essential to the way it conducts business across the board compared with standalone or project-based efforts that do not necessarily build capacity over time.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

- **Consultants can contribute to capacity building.** Most public agencies rely on consultants for a variety of community engagement tasks. These professionals bring skills that can complement staff work and using them wisely can contribute to government capacity if they know the community well. If it is specified in their scope of work, they can help build ongoing relationships with the community and contribute to program development (advising leaders, training staff, sharing best practices, connecting staff to the community, etc.). On the other hand, using consultants exclusively for individual projects in place of staff is unlikely to build long term government capacity.
- **Collaboration among jurisdictions has potential benefits but can also be challenging.** Fragmentation or duplication of efforts that target the same community can lead to inefficiencies and constraints on outreach and engagement. At the same time, some agencies may prefer not to collaborate across jurisdictions because they are reluctant to share power.
- **Government capacity is linked to community capacity.** A community that is highly informed and closely connected to one another is better able to participate in government processes, making efforts at engagement more effective. One way to build this community capacity is through various kinds of leadership programs. These can be created by government itself, or government may partner with social organizations to sponsor them. In addition, governments may work directly with organizations to amplify their ability to reach deeply into the community. A clear best practice to build and sustain partnerships is to sign formal contracts and pay community groups for their assistance. Engagement on specific plans or projects can enhance the effectiveness of future efforts if the government intentionally seeks to strengthen community relationships in the process.
- **There is an opportunity to expand partnerships between rural governments and public universities and colleges.** We learned about effective partnerships between cities in Oregon and both Eastern Oregon University and Portland State University, demonstrating how local governments can leverage support from faculty and students to expand their capacity for community engagement. However, we also heard that rural governments could be more proactive in pursuing grants from federal and state sources, particularly to redevelop brownfields. There is no shortage of potential work and funding that could benefit low-income residents, but rural cities

are typically thinly staffed and lack the technical training to pursue these grants. Projects eligible for these funds would also require meaningful public engagement to set community priorities for redevelopment.

- **State and federal governments are potentially valuable sources of support.** As noted in the report, federal and state agencies often set parameters and expectations for community engagement by local governments through rules and regulations. Many provide useful guidance about best practices in the field. At the same time, the capacity to provide direct support or consultation varies greatly across state agencies based on available funding and staff. If the state were to take a more active role in promoting community engagement (e.g., through revisions to Land Use Planning Goal 1 or a statewide policy like the example we found in Scotland), it would be important to offer corresponding support to local governments to help them meet the higher standards.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSION

- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is central to community engagement.** We found this to be true everywhere in Oregon, with the most active efforts in larger metropolitan areas and rural jurisdictions with changing demographics.
- **Local governments benefit from bringing more voices into the public process.** Despite the challenges of community engagement, we heard consistently from those who have been proactive that their efforts generally bring new perspectives to the table, improve relationships between leaders and community members, promote a sense of common purpose, and produce solutions that are more responsive to community needs.
- **Effective community engagement actively recruits community members from diverse backgrounds and experiences to avoid “the illusion of engagement”:** Philip Cooper describes this as “...a condition in which the elected officials and other community leaders consider that there is thorough and active community engagement because there are people engaged in a range of committees, commissions, and the governing body itself. In some communities, however, the same group of people serves year after year, and that includes the members of the governing body. Just as often, those who are actively involved are not representative of the diversity of community residents. Too often, the same people rotate onto and off of city councils, county commissions, or special district boards.”⁷

ADVANCING THE FIELD

This study revealed a desire by many public agencies to improve the way they engage their communities. Our analysis of the academic literature and the state of practice suggests several kinds of work that can advance the professional field of community outreach and engagement. These are spaces where practitioners are currently working and where local governments expressed a need for further research and development. We offer these categories to describe the field at large and to identify opportunities to move forward collectively.

- **Resources.** Local governments want resources to help build their capacity for community engagement. These could include manuals on best practices, examples of state-mandated Citizen Involvement programs, case studies from other jurisdictions, a list of digital engagement tools, a calendar of trainings and conferences, etc. To the extent that state or federal agencies provide resources for community engagement (e.g., field representatives, technical assistance, grants), local governments could use support to access these resources.

⁷ Cooper 2020, p. 176

- **Training.** Local governments want to understand the range of training topics that are available and who provides them locally. Practitioners can help to advance the field by tailoring their curricula to different levels of government (cities, counties, special districts), and to the specific needs of individual jurisdictions. We found that there are potential opportunities for practitioners to collaborate with statewide organizations that serve local governments. We also learned that governments want to expand relationships and partner with local community organizations.
- **Consultation.** Many practitioners offer multiple kinds of community engagement consultation. As with training, the field at large can serve local governments by adapting consultation services to meet the specific needs of each jurisdiction. Our research also suggests that local governments prefer consultation that helps their staff build internal and ongoing capacity (without continued dependence on the consultant). They also want support in drafting contracts and working effectively with public engagement practitioners.
- **Convening.** Our research revealed that informal peer networks and formally organized conferences are an important source of learning for local governments. Elected officials and staff share their experiences with their counterparts in other places and they take a practical approach to what does and does not work. It follows that local governments would benefit from connections among staff in similar positions across jurisdictions, and from forums to promote communication and collaboration with others who face similar situations and challenges.
- **Advocacy.** Those who value community engagement can seek to elevate its importance in the public process. In general, this can involve advocacy by local governmental organizations, professional associations, academic institutions, and practitioners for statewide programs and policies that encourage and support effective practices at the local level. In Oregon, one recent focus has been proposed revisions to Statewide Planning Goal 1, which requires every city and county in the state to include a Citizen Involvement chapter in its Comprehensive Plan.

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