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Core Principles for Public Engagement

Developed collaboratively in Spring 2009 by dozens of leaders in public engagement, with the expectation of ongoing dialogue and periodic revision.

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In a strong democracy, citizens and government work together to build a society that protects individual freedom while simultaneously ensuring liberty and justice for all. Engaging people around the issues that affect their lives and their country is a key component of a strong democratic society.

Public engagement involves convening diverse, representative groups of people to wrestle with information from a variety of viewpoints all to the end of making better, often more creative decisions. Public engagement aims to provide people with direction for their own community activities, or with public judgments that will be seriously considered by policy-makers and other power-holders.

The more any given public engagement effort takes into consideration the following seven Core Principles, the more it can expect to effectively build mutual understanding, meaningfully affect policy development, and/or inspire collaborative action among citizens and institutions. These seven interdependent principles serve both as ideals to pursue and as criteria for judging quality. Rather than promoting partisan agendas, the application of the Core Principles creates the conditions for authentic engagement around public issues.

A note about technology:

We believe the use of technology should be generally encouraged whenever appropriate to enhance and not impede these seven values — and also that these seven principles apply to both online and offline efforts to engage the public. However, there is not yet consensus in our field on standards for the use of technology that would warrant the inclusion of specific online or electronic guidelines in this document.

The Seven Core Principles

These seven recommendations reflect the *common* beliefs and understandings of those working in the fields of public engagement, conflict resolution, and collaboration. In practice, people apply these and additional principles in many different ways.

1. Careful Planning and Preparation

Through adequate and inclusive planning, ensure that the design, organization, and convening of the process serve both a clearly defined purpose and the needs of the participants.

2. Inclusion and Demographic Diversity

Equitably incorporate diverse people, voices, ideas, and information to lay the groundwork for quality outcomes and democratic legitimacy.

3. Collaboration and Shared Purpose

Support and encourage participants, government and community institutions, and others to work together to advance the common good.

4. Openness and Learning

Help all involved listen to each other, explore new ideas unconstrained by predetermined outcomes, learn and apply information in ways that generate new options, and rigorously evaluate public engagement activities for effectiveness.

5. Transparency and Trust

Be clear and open about the process, and provide a public record of the organizers, sponsors, outcomes, and range of views and ideas expressed.

6. Impact and Action

Ensure each participatory effort has real potential to make a difference, and that participants are aware of that potential.

7. Sustained Engagement and Participatory Culture

Promote a culture of participation with programs and institutions that support ongoing quality public engagement.