

Public Participation Principles: An Important Tool for Engaged Neighborhood Leaders and Activists

We have all been there: We work on input for a neighborhood project and feel like the suggestions that have a direct effect on our communities are ignored. Or we have worked diligently, going to all public meetings, meeting with our communities for ideas, working with the City to have it all disappear with no explanation and our requests for information are met with arrogance. We are invited to an “input” public meeting and have the feeling that the staff views it as a box to be checked off, not a moment of real communication. Or we have insisted on input and there are no feedback opportunities once a draft of an ordinance or policy has been released, especially if our input has been dismissed with no explanation.

Sound familiar? Sadly, this has often been our reality when working with the City to advocate for our neighborhoods and communities.

Until now.

In response to public frustrations, on February 2018 District 7 Councilwoman Ana Sandoval filed a Council Consideration Request (CCR), “Advancing City Public Participation” to “develop principles and standards for each City campaign to follow to create consistency, clear expectations, and ample opportunity for the public to provide input prior to Council action.”

Thank you D7 Councilwoman Ana Sandoval for listening to the concerns of all of us and taking action!

CoSA’s Definition of Public Participation:

“For the purpose of the principles and standards addressed in this directive, the City defines public participation as ‘any process that obtains and considers public input in a decision prior to taking action.’ ‘Public participation’ is a two-way communication with the goal of engaging stakeholders in the decision-making process. Public participation campaigns differ from public awareness and education campaigns, which do not include the opportunity for the public to influence the decision or outcome of a policy, program, or action. However, both campaign types utilize various marketing and public relations tactics to promote and support the effort, such as print advertising, social media and news releases.”

The Principles of Public Participation Principles that have been adopted

Councilwoman Sandoval’s CCR presented specific guiding principles to public participation and now these recommendations have been formally adopted by City Council:

TRANSPARENT – Be open and clear by communicating the decision-making process to the public including the role of public in the process, what type of input is sought and how the input will be used; provide a public record of the input received and the range of views and ideas expressed.

INCLUSIVE – Engage a broad range of stakeholders, with particular emphasis on those who do not normally take part in City public participation process; make every effort to ensure that stakeholder groups do not feel left out of the process.

TIMELY – Seek public input well ahead of key decisions; engage the public proactively.

ACCESSIBLE – Ensure that anyone who wants to participate in the process can provide input; overcome barriers to participation, whether they are geographical, physical, socioeconomic or language barriers.

CONVENIENT – Make it as easy as possible to engage with the City; provide multiple opportunities for the public to provide input; when possible, meet people where they are instead of only requiring them to show up at a public meeting; utilize the power of digital communications while being mindful of technology gaps.

INFORMATIVE – Educate through public participation; use the opportunity to help people understand how the City organization works and to enhance both the public's and the City's understanding of issues, policies and challenges; strive to ensure that opinions are informed with facts.

RESPECTFUL – Consider all input received, including differing viewpoints, while balancing the interests of all stakeholders.

CONTINUOUS – Treat every input provided by the public as another step toward a more engaged community by developing the infra structure to foster sustained participation; residents who make the effort to participate should be continually engaged in future efforts; residents who want to share an opinion with their City organization should be able to do so at any time.

MEANINGFUL – Ensure that public input is appropriately considered in the decision-making process; use public participation to improve City programs, policies, and ordinances.

RESPONSIVE – Communicate outcomes to all who participated and provided input.

Note: These are guidelines only: The City must find ways (strategies and ideas) and the money, when needed, to implement. Anything that takes funding (for example taping the meetings) will need an identified funding source or budget amendment.

What has been implemented or is in the process of implementation so far:

In June 2018, the Government and Public Affairs Department (GPA) the department that oversees communications and City-wide campaigns, presented a summary of public participation recommendations to the Governance Committee to consider. These minimum standards have been or are now in the process of implementation:

1. All City department campaigns should be branded SASpeakUp going forward, barring any special circumstances (i.e. SASpeakUp: Let's talk about scooters, etc.). GPA in a collaboration with the Information and Technology Services Department (ITSD) has rebranded the SASpeakUp a one-stop website for input for all public meetings and input opportunities. www.saspeakup.com
2. Public meetings, which often achieve attendance that is low or not necessarily representative of the entire community, should serve as a supplement to any input opportunity, not as the foundation for public participation.
3. A clear timeline should be established for each opportunity, including a two-week minimum input period. Results of the campaign should be reported in the standardized format and provided prior to any City Council briefing or action at the committee or meeting level.
4. Each campaign should utilize each of the City's existing communications resources, barring any special circumstances.
5. All surveys and associated materials must be printed and available online, made available in English and in Spanish.
6. All contact information gathered throughout the campaign should be added to the City's Central database and used to communicate campaign outcomes and new input opportunities.
7. GPA convenes a working group that by November had met six times to develop and implement recommendations for the City's digital engagement strategy.

Proposed strategies that still need to be implemented:

Directives by the Mayor and Councilwoman Sandoval proposed in an Addendum of Recommendations will be evaluated for costs and then implemented for Council approval. This is the direction provided to staff.

1. Enhanced Public Access to Council Meetings
 - broadcasting all Council Committee meetings, Planning Commission, Zoning Commission, and Board of Adjustment meetings livestream on social media and on public access television;
 - making video archives of the meetings accessible on the City website;
 - aggregating a record of council member votes and attendance; and
 - public transportation or parking assistance to members of the public attending City meetings.
2. Reviewing "Citizens to be Heard" (CTBH) Format and Recommending Best Practices
 - coordination of a minimum level of attendance by councilmembers and city management;
 - instructions for the public on how CTBH works to members of the public as they sign up to speak;
 - during the sign-in process, providing citizens options to meet with staff or council to address concerns; and
 - timely posting of questions/comments by citizens online, along with official response on the City's website and transmitted to Council.

3. Accountability / Customer Service

- enhancing current efforts to conduct customer service surveys and focus groups for City services which most frequently impact residents, i.e, waste pick up, code compliance, zoning, etc., as well as the internal process to regularly review, address and report on findings of customer services surveys to Council or appropriate advisory committee.
- a regular update on Public Participation Activities and Advances to the Community Health and Equity Committee (CHEC), including activities under development and other advances that would be of interest to Councilmembers and constituents.

Formation of a Citizens Advisory Group (This group will be formed soon):

In order to support these efforts, the Mayor will create a citizens advisory group to provide insight on the CHEC's consideration of the Advancing Public Participation recommendations. The advisory group will be comprised of leaders in the field of public engagement and community members with experience with City-led public participation processes.

What can we do?

- Please access the website at <http://www.saspeakup.com/> and sign up for updates.
- Study the details to this important ordinance. It is not a jargon-filled document. It is clear and easy to understand. I am printing out and highlighting sections that are most pertinent to our work.
- We must commit to continue to monitor the progress of the implementation strategies. Any strategy that needs to be funded (i.e. filming and archiving commission and committee meetings) will require funding sources. We need to support the approval of funding these important implementation strategies.
- Continue to ask how the ordinance is being implemented when dealing with different departments. It is up to us, the public, to now hold City departments responsible for upholding the new public input process. Are we seeing a difference? Let our elected officials know what is working and what is not.
- Continue to ask about how the City makes decisions. Who are the stakeholders and who had input that created the end result?
- Continue to look for ways the City can be more transparent and inclusive in its decision-making process.
- Continue to press for our elected representation to adhere to the spirit of the Public Participation Principles.

Timeline:

- February 2018 - Sandoval's CCR with signatures of support from Council members Bockhouse, Perry, Sandana, and Viagran. "Advancing Public Participation" that requests a comprehensive review of City-led public engagement activities on the basis that "successful development of policy and implementation of City programs depend on meaningful public engagement

- June 2018, The Government and Public Affairs Department (GPA) under the direction of Jeff Coyle, presents recommendations to the Governance Committee. GPA, they state, “is working diligently with department directors and communications staff to encourage compliance.” GPA convenes a working group that by November has met six times to develop and implement recommendations for the City’s digital engagement strategy.
- February – November 2018 The CCR worked through several committees including the Governance Committee and the Community Health and Equity Committee (CHEC)
- November 1, 2018 Memorandum from Mayor Ron Nirenberg and Ana Sandoval to Sheryl Scully: Addendum to CCR on Advancing Public Participation which make additional directives to staff.
- January 16, 2019 The CCR “Advancing Public Participation” that provides policy directives to City Manager and City staff by City Council is adopted.
- The City must find ways (strategies and ideas) and the money, when needed, to implement. Anything that takes funding (for example taping the meetings) will need an identified funding source or budget amendment. Now that Council has adopted the principles, staff will provide recommendations for their implementation, and the Mayor and City Manager will send out directives for implementation to staff.

Sources:

- City of San Antonio Council Consideration Request (CCR). “Advancing City Public Participation” submitted by Councilwoman Ana E. Sandoval. February 27, 2018
- Memorandum to Sheryl Sculley, City Manager. “Addendum to CCR on Advancing Public Participation.” from Mayor Ron Nirenberg and Councilwoman Ana E. Sandoval
- Agenda Memorandum File Number: 18-6437 to Community Health and Equity Committee. “Public Participation Recommendation.” Government and Public Affairs. November 26, 2018.
- City of San Antonio Legislative Details (With Text) File Number 18-6437 on the subject of “Public Participation Recommendations” November 26, 2018
- Agenda Memorandum File Number: 19-1438 to City Council A-Session. Government and Public Affairs. January 17, 2019.

Vocabulary:

- Principles: Resolve of principles are the guidelines that City Council adopted
- Recommendations: Suggestions for implementation that staff provides to Mayor and City Manager, elected officials and commissions.
- Directives: Directives are the instructions that the Mayor and City Manager hand down to City staff.