

# LGR

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW  
*Putting Research Into Practice*

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BY RICK MORSE AND ROB CARTY

# CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

## *Tools, Goals, and Successes*

### *Findings from the ICMA Innovations and Emerging Practices in Local Government Survey 2016*

Community outreach, citizen engagement, resident dialogue: These are the cornerstones of strong local participatory democracies today and in the future. Administrators ignore community engagement at their own or their community brand's peril, especially given the meteoric rise of social media. If administrators do not own their outreach, it will be owned by someone else, who may not be trying to benefit the community.

The benefits of engaging residents and other stakeholders in community building are significant: Engagement can increase understanding, create better and more sustainable decisions, and build trust. It can also build better, more cohesive communities and improve resident satisfaction. It's no surprise that "Democratic Advocacy and Public Engagement" is one of ICMA's Practices for Effective Local Government Leadership (<http://icma.org/practices>).

The challenge for local government managers is understanding how to bring about community engagement, using the vision, strategy, and tools that will create "the experience of belonging to the community," as author Peter Block describes engagement. What is the manager's role in this process, and what combination of strategies

and tools will produce meaningful engagement? What do we know about how and when and to what extent managers engage their communities?

These and other questions are addressed in a recent ICMA innovations and emerging practices survey of administrators, whose responses to select questions are the basis of this article. From this first cut of some of the responses we've learned, for example, that town hall meetings and city-appointed committee assignments are the engagement tools the survey respondents used most frequently. Social media, citizen surveys, and town hall meetings are the tools respondents rated as most successful. The responses tell us the level of commitment CAOs have to different participation goals and to specific practices and value statements about engagement. You'll also see that larger jurisdictions report higher levels of engagement.

The bottom line is that citizen engagement with government is at the heart of what it means to be a democracy and to engage in self-governance, and nowhere is this more direct and personal, with the potential to be more authentic or meaningful, than at the local government level. With this article we hope to shed light on what you can do to begin initiating community engagement or enhancing what you already have in place.

## ARE WE EMBRACING ENGAGEMENT?

Engagement implies more than just involvement or participation. In a 2010 Alliance for Innovation white paper (<http://icma.org/connected>) entitled “Connected Communities: Local Governments as a Partner in Citizen Engagement,” James H. Svvara and Janet Denhardt note that “citizen *engagement* focuses on revitalizing democracy, building citizenship, and reinforcing a sense of community, and it cannot be equated with one-way exchanges between government and citizens.”

Thus, one of the key questions in examining ICMA’s new dataset is, to what extent are local governments embracing engagement above and beyond traditional (i.e., narrower) conceptions of citizen participation?

## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The ICMA Innovations and Emerging Practices in Local Government Survey 2016 was conducted in collaboration with Arizona State University and the Alliance for Innovation in April 2016. ICMA surveyed 5,004 CAOs in general-purpose U.S. local governments based on a sampling framework, with a response rate of 11 percent

and a margin of error of +/- 3.9 percent. Full details on the survey metrics and demographics will become available on ICMA’s website ([http://icma.org/en/press/data\\_sets](http://icma.org/en/press/data_sets)).

Of the sample of 599 U.S. local governments, 94 are counties and 505 are municipalities. Forty-four percent of responding local governments operate under council-manager or council-administrator forms of government; 27 percent of the sample are identified as mayor-council.

Finally, of the 599 valid jurisdictions in this sample, 59 percent fall within a metropolitan statistical area (or MSA), while 15 percent are micropolitan and 23 percent undesignated. (The metropolitan status is determined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget.)

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

The survey asked respondents to rate the extent to which they use 16 different engagement tools in their jurisdiction, on a five-point Likert scale with these response options: never [1], rarely, moderately [3], regularly, frequently [5], and don’t know.

Table 1 summarizes the findings by rank ordering the 16 tools by their mean (average) response as well as median response. The most commonly used tool according to

**TABLE 1** || Engagement Tools Rank Ordered by Extent of Use

| CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT TOOL                                                 | Number of Respondents | Moderately, Regularly, or Frequently | Mean | Median |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|------|--------|
| Town hall meetings                                                      | 532                   | 73%                                  | 3.35 | 3      |
| City-appointed committee assignments                                    | 511                   | 67%                                  | 3.23 | 3      |
| Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)                                  | 510                   | 66%                                  | 3.22 | 3      |
| Strategic planning meetings                                             | 518                   | 63%                                  | 2.91 | 3      |
| Neighborhood association notification of land use changes in their area | 487                   | 52%                                  | 2.8  | 3      |
| Participatory budgeting                                                 | 520                   | 51%                                  | 2.76 | 3      |
| Citizen survey                                                          | 517                   | 46%                                  | 2.56 | 2      |
| Participatory design                                                    | 492                   | 41%                                  | 2.41 | 2      |
| Citizen review board                                                    | 497                   | 31%                                  | 2.11 | 2      |
| Citizen academies                                                       | 484                   | 26%                                  | 1.98 | 1      |
| Referenda, initiatives, recalls                                         | 489                   | 18%                                  | 1.91 | 2      |
| Citizen code enforcement deputies                                       | 487                   | 22%                                  | 1.77 | 1      |
| Neighborhood association control over zoning changes                    | 497                   | 19%                                  | 1.67 | 1      |
| Online engagement platforms (Peak Democracy, Budget Allocator, etc.)    | 479                   | 17%                                  | 1.66 | 1      |
| Neighborhood association decision control over some budget amount       | 479                   | 15%                                  | 1.59 | 1      |
| 311 phone system                                                        | 449                   | 11%                                  | 1.44 | 1      |

**Note:** A mean score of “3” indicates the tool was used moderately.

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*"I believe in an open-door policy for all, and my office is first in line to receive any person who may come to city hall. Listening is the other component that is important for civic leaders. If citizens have good ideas, give them credit and let them feel a part of the team. Many of our best ideas have come from citizens who came in to report (or posted on social media) a problem in our town."*

— City Manager Howard Garland, Darlington, South Carolina

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respondents is "town hall meetings," with a mean response of 3.35 (nearly halfway between moderately and regularly). Digging deeper in the data we see that of the 532 respondents to this question, 73 percent said they use town hall meetings moderately to frequently in their jurisdiction. Sixty-seven (67) percent said they use city-appointed committee assignments moderately to frequently. And so on. The least commonly used tool, according to respondents, is a 311 phone system.

These results are not surprising in the sense that town hall meetings have been a part of American local government essentially from the beginning. Appointed citizen committees and advisory boards are known to be common features in local government; in fact, many states mandate certain kinds of citizen boards and committees. The third most commonly used tool (almost tied for second) stands out, however, because it is a relatively new tool. Ten years ago we barely understood what social media was, yet today it is nearly ubiquitous, certainly in the private sector. And these data suggest that local governments are following suit, with two-thirds of respondents reporting at least moderate use of social media as a tool of citizen engagement.

The lineup of least used tools is also noteworthy for two reasons. A look at tools that had a mean response of less than "2" reveals four tools that transfer decision-making authority over to citizens and three others that are among the newer, most innovative approaches to engagement (citizens academies, online engagement, and 311).

Another observation from this question derives from examining the numbers of respondents who either did not check anything for a particular tool or who checked "don't know." Higher numbers of responses in those two categories may indicate a *higher relative level of unfamiliarity* with those tools among the profession. Interpreting the data in this way shows which tools appear to be less familiar to the responding CAOs. Fully 25 percent of respondents did not answer or checked "don't know" for "311 phone systems." Likewise, 20 percent did not answer or checked "don't

know" for "online engagement platforms (Peak Democracy, Budget Allocator, etc.)" and for "neighborhood association decision control over some budget amount."

The following engagement tools all had between 17 and 19 percent of responses in the "don't know" or no response category: participatory design, neighborhood association notification of land use changes in their area, citizen code enforcement deputies, referenda, initiatives, recalls, citizen review board, citizen academies, and neighborhood association control over zoning changes. All of these tools are more recent, somewhat cutting-edge approaches that clearly are not universally understood, as opposed to town hall meetings, committees, and surveys, for example, which are common features of local government. This suggests that advocates of these newer methods need to do more to educate local government managers about their approach and benefits.

## PERCEIVED SUCCESS OF DIFFERENT ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

The survey also asked respondents to rate how successful each of the tools has been at meeting their jurisdiction's participation goals. In this case they were given a four-point Likert-scale: very unsuccessful [1], somewhat unsuccessful, somewhat successful, and very successful [4].

In Table 2 we look at each of the 16 tools and at how those who reported using those tools "moderately," "regularly," or "frequently" rated how successful they are. (In other words, we did not include respondents who previously said they "never" or "rarely" used the tool.) The results have been sorted by the percentage viewing the tool as "somewhat" or "very" successful.

Sorting the data in this way highlights strong support for most of the engagement methods, with 12 of the 16 tools being marked as successful by two-thirds or more of the respondents. The five most successful engagement methods are also among the most commonly used: social

**TABLE 2 || How Respondents Rated the Successful or Unsuccessful Use of Different Engagement Tools**

| CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT TOOL                                                 | Number of Respondents | Somewhat or Very Successful | Somewhat or Very Unsuccessful | Don't Know |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|
| Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)                                  | 340                   | 87%                         | 7%                            | 6%         |
| Citizen survey                                                          | 241                   | 86%                         | 10%                           | 4%         |
| Town hall meetings                                                      | 391                   | 85%                         | 13%                           | 2%         |
| Strategic planning meetings                                             | 320                   | 79%                         | 11%                           | 11%        |
| City-appointed committee assignments                                    | 340                   | 79%                         | 10%                           | 12%        |
| Citizen academies                                                       | 128                   | 77%                         | 15%                           | 9%         |
| Citizen review board                                                    | 156                   | 74%                         | 11%                           | 15%        |
| Neighborhood association notification of land use changes in their area | 257                   | 72%                         | 8%                            | 20%        |
| Participatory budgeting                                                 | 266                   | 70%                         | 20%                           | 9%         |
| Participatory design                                                    | 208                   | 69%                         | 17%                           | 14%        |
| Referenda, initiatives, recalls                                         | 89                    | 69%                         | 11%                           | 20%        |
| Citizen code enforcement deputies                                       | 112                   | 68%                         | 14%                           | 18%        |
| Neighborhood association control over zoning changes                    | 88                    | 63%                         | 9%                            | 28%        |
| Online engagement platforms (Peak Democracy, Budget Allocator, etc.)    | 87                    | 61%                         | 17%                           | 22%        |
| Neighborhood association decision control over some budget amount       | 72                    | 58%                         | 14%                           | 28%        |
| 311 phone system                                                        | 57                    | 56%                         | 19%                           | 25%        |

**Note:** A mean score of “3” indicates the tool was used moderately.

media, surveys, town hall meetings, strategic planning meetings, and citizen committees (or advisory boards). The bottom four include two newer methods that use technology and two more substantive examples of neighborhood empowerment. Even in those cases the percentages of respondents saying those tools are unsuccessful are still quite low (9-19 percent). The percentages indicating “don’t know” are higher (all around 25 percent or more), suggesting that these newer modes of engagement may be difficult to assess in terms of impact or perceived success until they are more widely adopted.

## PARTICIPATION GOALS

The survey also examines local government variations in goals related to different degrees of participation. The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (<http://bit.ly/iap2ppspec-trum>) is a widely used way of thinking about different participation goals.

IAP2 (International Association of Public Participation) designed the spectrum “to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public’s role in any public participation process. The spectrum shows that differing levels of participation are legitimate and depend

on the goals, time frames, resources, and levels of concern in the decision to be made.” The spectrum identifies five broad goals from least to most participant impact on decisions: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower.

The ICMA survey question about participation goals aligned each described participation goal with the points on the IAP2 Spectrum and asked how important each goal was to the local government. One additional goal—“hearing from a broad cross-section of residents”—was added to capture an overall commitment to diversity and representation in public participation. Given that each goal could at least potentially be applicable in any local government jurisdiction, we combined the “not at all important” and “not applicable” responses for our analysis. Table 3 displays these re-coded responses.

The responses indicate broad acceptance for the goals of keeping the public informed and also involving the public by understanding and considering their concerns (average response of “important”). There is less strong support for the consultative approach to public participation and even less for collaboration. Very few (19%) said empowering the public with decision making was a primary goal (important or highly important). Slightly more than two-



**TABLE 3 || Local Government Commitment to Various Participation Goals**

| PARTICIPATION GOALS                                                                                                                         | Number Respondents | Mean Response | % Important or Highly Important |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Provide the public with objective information to assist them in understanding problems/solutions/alternatives. <b>[Inform]</b>              | 536                | 3.9           | 75%                             |
| Obtain feedback from the public on analyses of problems/solutions/alternatives. <b>[Consult]</b>                                            | 534                | 3.5           | 60%                             |
| Work directly with the public to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. <b>[Involve]</b>    | 536                | 3.8           | 69%                             |
| Partner with the public in development of alternatives, identification of the preferred solution, and decision making. <b>[Collaborate]</b> | 534                | 3.4           | 56%                             |
| Place decision making in the hands of the public. <b>[Empower]</b>                                                                          | 529                | 2.3           | 19%                             |
| Hear input/ideas from a broad cross-section of residents. <b>[Diversity, Representation, Inclusion]</b>                                     | 535                | 3.7           | 68%                             |

**Note:** The Likert scale for these questions was: not at all important [1], slightly important, moderately important [3], important, and highly important [5], with an additional “not applicable” option.

**TABLE 4 || Engagement Culture and Practice**

| PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT CULTURE AND PRACTICE STATEMENT                                                                                                                                                                 | Mean Response | % Disagree or Strongly Disagree | % Agree or Strongly Agree |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Attention is primarily focused on the minimum legal requirements for public engagement, including public comment periods and hearings.                                                                           | 2.78          | 46%                             | 31%                       |
| There are few public engagement practices beyond minimum requirements, and they vary by department.                                                                                                              | 2.78          | 47%                             | 31%                       |
| There are expectations that more extensive and deliberative public engagement beyond minimum requirements will be used for local decision making (e.g., budgeting and general plans).                            | 3.52          | 13%                             | 56%                       |
| There is an adopted set of principles that generally define and encourage the use of effective and inclusive public engagement when/as appropriate.                                                              | 3.29          | 20%                             | 46%                       |
| Partnerships are developed with neighborhood and community organizations to involve the public in appropriate public engagement activities over time.                                                            | 3.5           | 13%                             | 55%                       |
| There is an established and ongoing body, process, or protocol that provides community representatives with input into the direction, operation, and adaptation of a public engagement plan or set of practices. | 3.18          | 25%                             | 40%                       |

**Note:** n=538. The Likert scale for these questions was: strongly disagree [1], disagree, neutral [3], agree, strongly agree [5].

*“Ishpeming uses **active Facebook page participation to engage our community**. We send out information almost daily and actively respond to comments and questions sent to our Facebook page. Replies to our questions about utility rate increases or public policy changes have documented high levels of engagement with our Facebook followers. Currently **about half our population follows** the city’s Facebook page.”*

— City Manager Mark Slown, Ishpeming, Michigan

thirds of the respondents said that getting a broad cross-section of residents is an important or highly important goal of their local government.

## CULTURE AND PRACTICE AROUND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Another bank of questions asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with several statements that capture specific practices and even cultural aspects of citizen engagement in local government. Table 4 reports the mean responses to the statements along with the percentages of those disagreeing or strongly disagreeing and those agreeing or strongly agreeing.

The results of this bank of questions corresponds in some ways with the questions regarding commitment to different levels of engagement as reflected in the IAP2 Spectrum. Respondents generally agreed with going beyond the minimum, including developing partnerships with community organizations. But a smaller proportion of jurisdictions go as far as having a clear engagement plan informed by citizen involvement.

## PERCEPTIONS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Respondents were also asked to characterize the overall level of citizen participation in their local government’s engagement efforts and initiatives along this three-point scale: [1] low: small number of regular participants; [2] medium: some representation across different parts of the community depending on the issue; and [3] high: regular representative group of community members on issues of importance.

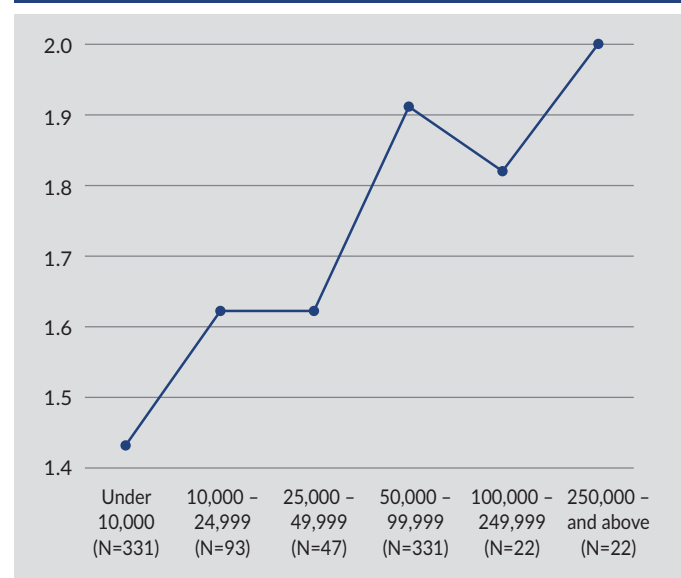
Of the 556 respondents who answered the question, the majority (53 percent) characterized the overall level of participation as “low,” while 38.5 percent indicated a “medium” level of participation, and only 8.5 percent indicated “high” participation.

There was no statistically meaningful difference between county and municipal respondents. However, there was a statistically meaningful difference in how respondents answered this question based on their population grouping—namely, larger jurisdictions tended to report higher levels of participation. Figure 1 shows the mean responses by population categories, and the trend is clear (and statistically significant beyond the .01 level).

## A FEW OBSERVATIONS

At a broad level, we find that some tools with high adoption rates are also viewed as successful at engaging the community. Also, we find that many respondents agree that inclusion and informing the public are highly important. We might hypothesize both of these results to be

**FIGURE 1** || Mean Overall Level of Community Participation by Jurisdiction Population



true. Where it starts to get interesting is around culture and practice: There is some agreement about base levels of engagement, but still large numbers disagree about what level is necessary for success. Do different engagement cultures correlate to goals and tools used? Is it

possible to have a highly successful engagement with a more-or-less minimalist approach? We're going to explore these and other questions about how culture, goals, and tools are used for engagement as we delve deeper into these data in the future.

## KEY SURVEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Town hall meetings, government-appointed committee assignments, and social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) were the top three citizen engagement tools used by survey respondents.
2. Some tools, such as 311 systems and online engagement platforms, are likely too new and don't have sufficiently widespread adoption to determine effectiveness.
3. Of the tools evaluated, social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), citizen surveys, and town hall meetings were rated as the most successful in meeting engagement goals.
4. Almost everyone agreed that keeping the public informed was critical, and a large percentage agree with the goal of involving citizens, but fewer support the goal of collaborating with citizens, and very few support the goal of empowering citizens with decision-making authority.
5. The majority of respondents said that getting a broad cross-section of residents is an important or highly important goal of their local government.
6. There was no statistically meaningful difference between county and municipal respondents' perceptions of overall levels of citizen participation.
7. Larger jurisdictions tended to report higher levels of participation.



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BY ANN MAHONEY AND JELANI NEWTON

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# RE-STRUCTURED FOR Economic Success

*Lessons from three communities in strategic change*

Recently ICMA, Arizona State University, and the Alliance for Innovation conducted a 2016 innovations survey to explore innovation and organizational change in U.S. local governments. Among respondents who described the kinds of changes they are making, changes to the local government's role in economic development and the organizational alignment of this function were commonly cited.

With more than thirty years of conducting survey research in the area of economic development in local government, ICMA has gathered data about such things as how local governments fund economic development, what barriers they encounter, and what motivates economic development.

First-hand stories bring the research to life, so we talked with three of the innovation survey respondents about their significant organizational changes related to economic development. They generously shared not only their specific examples of change and innovation but also their observations, lessons learned, and insights.

What follows are highlights from three separate January 2017 conversations—three distinct stories that demonstrate

how innovative thinking and organizational change are firmly linked:

- building capacity by adding a new economic development manager position
- creating a joint city-county office—the Office of Economic Vitality
- establishing a stand-alone economic development department that includes community development and sustainability.

## City of Johnston, Iowa

**Population:** 19,550 (2015 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau)

**Land area:** 17.16 square miles

**Median household income:** \$97,457 (2015 ACS)

If you're a relatively small jurisdiction with limited capacity, do you even need to engage in economic development independently of local or regional nonprofit economic development corporations (EDCs), which often take on this role? The city of Johnston, Iowa, demonstrates why the answer could be yes. Having its own economic development manager is giving Johnston the focus it needed to get things done.

The new position was implemented at a time of significant growth, to address concerns about commercial services, job opportunities, and residential growth. The city wanted to attract diverse businesses and use targeted marketing to zero in on specific areas available for development. Prior to the city hiring an economic development

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*Note:* Our sincere thanks to our interviewees, who so generously shared their experiences. For more information about these initiatives, you can contact the interviewees at the following email addresses: James Sanders, [jsanders@cityofjohnston.com](mailto:jsanders@cityofjohnston.com) (City of Johnston); Vincent Long, [longv@leoncountyfl.gov](mailto:longv@leoncountyfl.gov) (Leon County); and Erik Caldwell, [ECaldwell@sandiego.gov](mailto:ECaldwell@sandiego.gov) and [@erikcaldwell](https://twitter.com/erikcaldwell) (Twitter), and David Graham, [GrahamD@sandiego.gov](mailto:GrahamD@sandiego.gov) (San Diego).

manager, these goals were not necessarily prioritized by the local EDC, whose priorities were set primarily by member businesses.

The EDC directs prospects to the city because it's the city's function to address issues of infrastructure, regulation/codes, incentives, and the like. With a new economic development manager on staff, the city is positioned to make the most of those leads as well as to coordinate activities with the EDC. Implementing the change entailed carefully communicating with and involving the EDC in a way that did not negatively affect that long-standing relationship.

**ICMA: What changes are you noticing with the existence of the new position?**

**City Manager James Sanders:** The important thing is that our person has been out talking with businesses, updating TIF (tax increment financing) policies, and updating processes. Our level of communication has increased significantly. We're always updating information we have on our businesses, creating new partnerships, and using what we learn to help improve our incentives. We're having to approach modifying rules and regulations—looking to see if we can take down some of the barriers—by balancing the safety and integrity of the community with the needs of businesses.

**ICMA: What's been challenging about adding the new position?**

**Sanders:** Really, the hardest part was trying not to alienate the long-established economic development group. At times the situation with the EDC was a little contentious in some respects even though the idea was never to replace this entity. So we did a lot of work to get them involved up front as a partner. Still, for example, the EDC felt we were dragging our feet to some extent. We in government work a little more slowly than those in the private sector are accustomed to. It took us about a year to get council support and funding. All that while we worked particularly hard on the communication front.

We learned we have to communicate early and often, as appropriate, so that we're all still a team. And we recognize the importance of having the right leaders involved.

## Leon County, Florida

**Population: 282,940 (2015 ACS)**

**Land area: 666.85 square miles**

**Median household income: \$46,745 (2015 ACS)**

With pressure to deliver more and better services more efficiently than ever, city-county partnerships have the potential to offer both entities strong advantages. In Leon County, Florida, creating a new city-county alignment entailed building on a city-county partnership already in place, jumping on a significant funding opportunity, and engaging the community.

With the renewal of the infrastructure sales tax referendum, new funds were targeted for economic development. The new tax dollars and focus prompted the county to conduct a community-wide exercise in community development through the "Blueprint 2000 and Beyond" strategic planning process. The exercise identified a soft spot—namely, not having an economic development hub for the community.

The county realized that a new Office of Economic Vitality could be the hub where discussion, coordination, and collaboration among all of the community's economic development interests converged. The office could also make policy decisions that fund projects.

And luckily for Leon County, a joint office of the city and county had already been established to implement voter-approved infrastructure projects. In essence the county could "snap in" the economic development component because it had the administrative structure, citizen committees, and governing structure all in place.

**ICMA: How's the new office working?**

**County Administrator Vincent S. Long:** It's doing a lot to leverage and align all the resources of the community. It's a lot more seamless. And it serves as the economic development office of record to the state office of economic development. It lets us look at projects holistically, not as a county project as distinct from a city project. Our citizens told us to think big when it comes to economic development, just as we did when developing the infrastructure projects funded through the sales tax extension. Of course, it helped to have a track record of trust and credibility—much of which was the outcome of having engaged the community.

**ICMA: What insight would you offer others in making a change like this?**

**Long:** Many communities around the country keep doing what they've done before. Our advice: Consider the possibilities and consider the big things—being catalytic, bringing communities together, working on big projects; they all align with economic development. As local governments we bring lots of capacity to bear. [Local governments] are well structured for project oversight, reporting, and accounting, as well as for getting citizen involvement. You also need to keep in balance the fact that you still need and want private sector active involvement and engagement and evaluation of specific policies and projects.

## San Diego, California

**Population: 1,359,791 million (2015 ACS)**

**Land area: 325.19 square miles**

**Median household income: \$66,116 (2015 ACS)**

To some, it would seem that San Diego has resources few can even dream of. But like any jurisdiction, San Diego has its own set of challenges, so tackling economic develop-

ment meant being clear about the city's vision and being innovative. San Diego's stand-alone economic development department is innovative in that the department also encompasses the function of community development. Its focus is not only on business attraction and expansion but also on investing in its neighborhoods.

On the business development side, the bulk of San Diego's effort is on birthing and growing companies, helping them to be successful. Thus one focus of the newly realigned economic development department is on understanding and supporting the emerging economies. And by bringing economic and community development together, San Diego found that the same department that's helping bring companies to San Diego to create jobs for all is also the department focused on inclusive growth.

It has led San Diego to consider such questions as how to bring more people into the economy and once in the workforce, how to keep them upwardly mobile. As a result, San Diego has become more invested in education as it relates to the workforce, recognizing the importance of training and retraining.

Taking the time to learn what San Diego businesses, community organizations, and residents really need revealed that the convergence of economic development, sustainability, and community development is where the city can offer the most value. In turn, that convergence created not only alignment and synergy but also shared funding opportunities. For example, aligning an infrastructure program (in this instance, a smart-sensored LED streetlight upgrade) with community development dollars allowed more deployment citywide and full deployment in underserved CDBG (community development block grant) areas.

**ICMA: How did you get the diverse staff of a newly configured economic development department rowing in the same direction?**

**Director of Economic Development Erik Caldwell:** We got all the players to think about how they're serving an economic development mission.

So, for example, when you're talking about sustainability, you're talking about saving the world but also talking about creating jobs. When you're talking about community development, you're making communities a better place in which to make future investments by making investments today. We also made sure that smaller companies can use the same tools that apply to recruitment and retention of larger companies. We've brought together the existing toolboxes from different departments and are using them across a wider spectrum of issues that are all related to economic development.

**ICMA: What about the hurdles, challenges, lessons?**

**Caldwell:** One of the first you confront is the "that's not the way we've always done it" mindset. You begin to change that by getting the team to realize that realignment will

produce a better end state and allow them to do new and interesting things. You even change the relationship with other departments and other organizations because you're rethinking the way you provide services.

**Deputy Chief Operating Officer–Neighborhood Services**

**David Graham:** An interesting challenge is one I'd call "mission creep," something we're resisting or even excising from the economic development department. Things that may have made sense at some point in the past are being trimmed from the department as we try to rebuild with the right building blocks.

Another challenge is training or retraining employees to be comfortable with and adapt to rapidly changing technologies. A big part of it is how and when we bring employees into the decision-making process and discussing their roles and involvement when deploying a new technology.

An interesting challenge is learning the best ways to support the innovation economy. We inform our elected leaders about the difference between a start-up and a small business, and about what we can actually do to support the innovation economy and what we can't do.

This perspective has helped us reexamine the definition of "resources." Some economic development resources aren't money. For example, our chief information security officer specifically identified small local cybersecurity companies and brought them in to do work with our cybersecurity networks. For these small companies "a resource" was getting the opportunity to work on a municipal government network.

**Caldwell:** [Another dimension of] this narrative is really just pushing the message again and again that economic development is a team sport.

## MORE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

For additional information about economic development, investigate these resources on ICMA's website:

- [The economic development topic page](#)
- [ICMA Economic Development Survey Results 2014](#)
- [The City as a Platform: Fostering Community Innovation in Fort Collins, CO \[premium ICMA member-only content\]](#)
- [Why Small Business Matters](#)
- [Innovative Approaches to Funding Economic Development](#)
- [Monitoring Economic Development Performance.](#)



## SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

Your colleagues have initiated organizational changes stemming from the demands and opportunities of economic development. They've been innovative, opportunistic, and inclusive within the constraints of their unique situations. They've learned to think holistically and are instilling that mindset with their staffs. Here are just a handful of their observations:

- Economic development comes in more than one flavor. It can encompass business expansion and attraction. It can zero in on supporting start-up businesses. And it can build on the nexus of community development, economic development, and sustainability.
- Credibility is established when your partners—both inside and outside your organization—realize you're after the same things they are, namely, the community's long-term sustainable growth and health.
- Have the right leaders at the table. You'll want existing public-private economic development partners to stay invested as stakeholders in the community.
- Embedding innovation into economic development entails figuring out what customers, users, and staff really need and what you can provide that is unique.

- Put communication on overdrive. Learn to communicate early and often so that everyone is still operating as a team.

Economic development takes many paths, depending on the organizational structures in place, defined roles within that structure, the articulation of vision and goals, and resources. The three stories offered here prove that determination, credibility within the community, an innovative mindset, and good timing go a long way to advancing economic development.



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### JUNE 2017 SPECIAL SECTION

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In the tradition of *The Municipal Year Book*, **LGR: Local Government Review**—a special section of *Public Management (PM)*—will present key research findings and expert insights about local government issues and trends. This is the second in what we anticipate being a series of **LGR** special sections. **LGR** will be published as new research findings and analyses become available.

ICMA's intent is to contribute to the profession's collective understanding of practices, policies, and trends that have a significant impact on local governments, now and with an eye toward the future.

**LGR: Local Government Review** is offered to ICMA members as a benefit of membership. Non-ICMA members will be able to purchase e-copies of this special section from [ICMA's online bookstore](#) for \$8.95 as of May 23, 2017.

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Direct editorial questions to Ann Mahoney at [lgrfeedback@icma.org](mailto:lgrfeedback@icma.org).

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