

How Good Data Can Beat Bad Politics: Using Broad Community Input to Overcome 40 Years of Political Decisions and Constraints that Created a Housing Shortage

Placer County, California

#Authentic Community Connections

Population: 375,000

Innovation

Criteria:

- Initiative fundamentally changed a process, product or service (fundamental)
- OR
- Initiative builds upon existing knowledge to improve a product, process or service (incremental)
 - The initiative substantially stretched the boundaries of ordinary governmental operations.

Describe Your Innovation

(When and how did this innovation get started? Do also detail how the program or policy innovative, how it has changed previous processes, products, or services, and how it has substantially stretched or improved the boundaries of ordinary governmental operations.)

Placer County, like many other places in California, continues to face a critical housing shortage. More and more of our residents are unable to rent or buy homes that meet their budget, and that is making it harder for local businesses to attract and retain employees, hampering economic growth. Ensuring a healthy housing stock and variety of housing to meet all budgets is one of the county's top priorities. So we've undertaken a comprehensive effort to address the crisis and its many underlying causes. The first step was to develop our first-ever housing strategy.

But many local efforts to improve housing policies are dead on arrival politically, once local homeowners organize their loud and influential opposition through public meetings and other modes of public input (emails, phone calls, unscientific surveys, etc). The NIMBY noise can be insurmountable so as part of our effort we wanted broad community input that was truly representative and reliable. We believed the loud opposition to "smaller and taller" was unrepresentative so we hoped we would discover broad support from a quiet majority we never hear from.

We succeeded. We didn't ask the usual questions or ask them the usual way. We did short, scientific FlashVote surveys with questions that were carefully crafted to get at public interests separate from private interests. We wanted to understand the ranges and reasons for public support and disagreement. We found overwhelming support for smaller and more affordable housing, especially in the part of the county with the highest and fastest rising prices – where opposition might be expected to be highest. We used the data from our first survey in a second survey to drill down on support for specific ideas.

We heard from the many, not just the noisy. We overcame bad politics with good data.

Collaboration

Criteria:

- Initiative demonstrated engaging stakeholders both internal and external.
- Initiative demonstrated high performance teaming, breaking down internal silos.
- Strategic partnerships and or community networks were developed as a result of the initiative

In less than 200 words, what individuals or groups are considered the primary initiators of your program? How does the innovation engage stakeholders or demonstrate high performance teaming? What strategic partnerships and/or community networks, if any, were developed?

Shawna Purvines was the lead from planning and Chris Gray-Garcia was the lead from communications. Shawna and Chris worked together on a range of public engagement, including the outreach strategy and the creation of questions with FlashVote.

We teamed with thousands of local community members. Our two surveys averaged 1763 responses in our scientific sample and 2774 total responses and we now have over 4,000 locals in our panel for future surveys through FlashVote.

If a private consultant was used please describe in detail their involvement, identify the consultant and/or firm and provide contact information. Maintain a 100 word maximum.

We partnered with FlashVote to design the housing survey questions and collect the scientific survey data from our residents using their rapid multichannel survey system (email, text, phone call) for local governments. Contact: Kevin Lyons, CEO, FlashVote 510-593-4901 kevin@flashvote.com

Significance

Criteria:

- Initiative addresses an area of concern for the majority of local government organizations.
- Initiative can serve as a model and replicated in other jurisdictions.

Please describe the extent to which you believe your program or policy initiative is potentially replicable within other jurisdictions and why? To your knowledge, have any other jurisdictions or organizations established programs or implemented policies modeled specifically on this project? Please also provide verification of the replication.

Housing shortages can be fixed the same way everywhere: you build more housing units. Same for making housing more affordable: you make housing units smaller. But local politics can make it difficult or impossible to implement these obvious solutions. Everyone wants a low cost deal as a prospective buyer or renter, but once they become homeowners who “have theirs already”, they mostly benefit from rising prices. The local NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) reaction gets worse when you talk about doing smaller and taller housing development to serve lower income levels. This is why high cost states like California have tried introducing state level solutions for this local NIMBY problem.

But there is another possibility if the special interest opposition is not representative of the broader community or the public interest. By getting statistically valid community input that measured true public sentiments and interests in regard to housing, we were able to overcome the false perceptions that “the community” doesn’t want more and smaller housing.

Our consultant, FlashVote, has other fascinating examples where good data has empowered local governments to overcome bad input and make better decisions (as in the first 3 minutes of this video <https://youtu.be/sKZJdtkwARg>).

Effectiveness

Criteria:

- Initiative addresses a community or organization need.
- Initiative has achieved tangible results.
- Initiative improved the organizational culture or the traditional approach to problem solving.
- Initiative has received recognition for its achievements, i.e. independent evaluation, national recognition, local press, etc.

Please describe the most significant obstacle(s) encountered thus far by your program. How have they been dealt with? Which ones remain?

In California there are about 40 years of accumulated financial, regulatory and political constraints that have caused housing shortages. While Placer County housing is highly unaffordable by any national metric, we have managed to be the most “affordable” county in California by doing some things better than others. But still have a big shortage. To make the big improvement that we needed bold recommendations for changes, which requires political will. So we needed a bold approach to public input that could overcome all the inertia and entrenched oppositional interests. We’ve done that with the data we’ve collected and the support we found for necessary recommendations.

The process of revising, improving and adopting the recommendations will continue but the key hurdle was overcoming the major roadblock from unrepresentative and misleading public input. Moving forward we may also do additional surveys to further refine the ideas in ways that increase community support.

What outcomes did this program or policy have? Could you share one or two objective measures that demonstrate these outcomes? Ultimately, how did you measure the change based on the intervention, and why do you believe in the credibility of this assessment?

We did a first survey called “Housing Costs and Needs” that was open June 27 to June 29, 2018 and focused on public interests. We learned that community support aligned with bringing less expensive housing to Placer County. This was a huge boost for the project. Key metrics included 4 to 1 public support for “The range of housing costs in Placer County should match the range of people’s incomes” and 3 to 1 public support for “Placer County should remove barriers to building smaller and less expensive housing units” as seen here:

<https://www.flashvote.com/placer-ca/surveys/housing-costs-and-needs-06-18?utf8=%E2%9C%93&filter=owner>.

The support was highest for non-owners but still overwhelming amongst home owners:

<https://www.flashvote.com/placer-ca/surveys/housing-costs-and-needs-06-18?utf8=%E2%9C%93&filter=local> We

also got lots of useful suggestions for improvements from open-ended comments. With this scientific data we had the backing to make the necessary recommendations in a July 2018 draft of our Housing Strategy.

We also did a second survey called “Housing Choices” that was open August 29 to August 31. This survey built on the results of the first survey to drill down into specific community preferences and recommendations for smaller and less expensive housing, such as location, types and removing barriers. Several important regulatory change ideas had support from a majority of respondents, especially in the high cost areas again: <https://www.flashvote.com/placer-ca/surveys/housing-choices-08-18>. We learned how citizens perceived and valued different possibilities and again got lots of good ideas and observations from open ended comments that will shape the final recommendations.

Has the program received any press or other media coverage to date? If yes, please list the sources and briefly describe relevant coverage.

Not that we are aware of since its recent and hasn't been promoted yet.

Presentation

Criteria:

- Presentation will be delivered by a team.
- Presentation will be highly interactive and engaging.

Example Social Media Post

Housing costs are a problem in many communities, and usually a political challenge. Learn how your community can help you beat bad politics with good data – even for a contentious issue like housing development – and how to use our approach for any important issue! #Hearfromthemanym

Please write an abstract or short description for your innovation that would make conference attendees say "Well, I need to attend this session!"

Housing shortages can be fixed the same way everywhere: you build more housing units. Same for making housing more affordable: you make housing units smaller. But local politics can make it difficult or impossible to implement these obvious solutions. Everyone wants a low cost deal as a prospective buyer or renter, but once they become homeowners who “have theirs already”, they mostly benefit from rising prices. The local NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) reaction gets worse when you talk about doing smaller and taller housing development to serve lower income levels. This is why high cost states like California have tried introducing state level solutions for this local NIMBY problem.

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You can do this too. For any important issue. Don’t miss this interactive presentation with eye-opening examples and actionable steps that will empower you to easily beat bad politics with good data.

How will you make the session creative and unique?- How do you plan to be both entertaining and educational?- Include a description of how your session will facilitate group activities and/or interaction.- What will attendees be able to have as an actionable "takeaway" from the session?

We'll include engaging data, images and videos to tell our stories and we'll have live audience participation and interaction to guess along with the examples as part of the presentation. Most importantly people will leave with a simple recipe that any government can use to beat bad politics with good data for any important issue.

Anything else you would like to add?

Not at this time, but we are happy to update or provide additional information if helpful.