

IS IT TIME TO CHANGE THE WAY WE DO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION?

A Gathering on December 1st and 2nd

"Love and conflict are binding."
-Hawaiian proverb

On December 1-2, 2017, more than 150 people from the civic, private, and public sectors and the public at large are expected to gather for an important conference at the East-West Center. The conference, open to all on a seat-limited basis, is called ***Public Participation in a Polarized Era: The Good, the Bad, the Future***. Our intention is to take stock of how public participation in Hawai'i is faring these days, and exchange ideas for ways to include more people in more conversations with higher quality results.

Why this gathering and why now? The short answer is that we—the people and organizations involved in making, shaping, legislating and communicating public policies—are increasingly concerned and frustrated. It's not just the national mood. It's also local.

Above all else, democracy is a set of cherished institutional procedures founded on the resolute belief that citizens can—and should—govern themselves. Democracy, messy and contentious as it gets, assumes ordinary people have the collective capacity, means, and will to participate in key decisions about their own welfare. A stable and enduring democracy in Hawai'i, or anyplace for that matter, functions on a few key building blocks. Civic involvement is one of the most important of these.

Surveys show continuing low confidence and trust in government, the media, and most of our other traditionally reliable institutional structures: schools, churches, hospitals, and more. Increasingly, this trust-space is occupied by anger, hostility and blame, often amplified by social media. Perceived sleights and grievances seem to accelerate and then quickly pivot into the politics of resentment. Polarization and cynicism then suck the oxygen out of conversation and collaboration and make it easier and easier to hate people whose ideas or affiliations are simply different.

The outcome is that the public's capacity and will to get involved in decision-making are eroding. Low voter numbers in Hawai'i are only one sign. The unwillingness to engage in constructive dialogue with people who disagree is another.

It wasn't always this way. In the late 1970s, a time just as turbulent as our decade, U.S.

government agencies adopted strong community consultation strategies, many of them in the face of new environmental laws. Foremost among these were the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), sunshine laws, and the use of public meetings whenever new policies, projects, rules and plans were proposed.

Called by different names—public consultation, civic participation, stakeholder engagement – these reforms promised earlier notice of impending decisions; more responsiveness from slow-moving, underfunded, and sometimes secretive bureaucracies; additional opportunities for diverse voices; a more level playing field between government, corporations and communities; new checks and balances against authoritative less than transparent decision-making.

What has evolved from this are many different channels for people to meet, get informed, ask questions, and deliberate on the issues of the day. Some are required under ‘Sunshine’ laws or the mandated procedures of Environmental Impact Statements, Section 106 historic preservation consultations, Special Management Area Permits, and agency rule making. Others are voluntary: information briefings, advisory committees, surveys, planning charrettes, electronic town halls, focus groups, and many more.

Despite all these channels, public participation doesn’t seem quite up to the challenge of this more polarized era. Four decades after the wave of reforms in the ‘70s, too many hearings and public meetings have become perfunctory ‘check-the-box’ compliance exercises, or simply fresh combat zones for old ideological wars. Alternatively, many groups choose to meet only with like-minded people they already tend to agree with. The meetings become echo chambers.

Many efforts also dissolve into formulaic productions by project proponents or well-organized opposition campaigns. As public discourse becomes increasingly polarized and hostile, most people are turned off and it gets harder to arrive at ideas

Public Participation in a Polarized Era The Good, the Bad, the Future

Day 1

Taking Stock and Devising Solutions

Friday, December 1, 2017

8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

East-West Center

Imin Hall

Day 2

Public Consultation Strategies and Skills

Saturday, December 2, 2017

8:30a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
William S. Richardson School of Law
Classroom 2

To Register:

<http://www.accord3.com/pg1019.cfm>

that can be supported by a plurality of citizens. Instead, businesses often feel victimized by the tyranny of the minorities that come to public meetings, advocacy groups feel frustrated that they have so little impact, and many fine government officials come to view public involvement as an unfunded bureaucratic burden they must endure.

Conflict and contention are ambient conditions of modern life and part of the way we do business in democracies. We have become more and more comfortable viewing the people we disagree with as adversaries. We need smarter forums for sustained communication, serious community soul searching, and – above all – solution seeking and problem solving.

New models and methods can't be proxies for "Don't worry, be happy" nor can they aim for complete and full consensus in a society as culturally, economically, and politically diverse as Hawai'i. The process of creating better public engagement in policy development and planning must be about achieving sufficient consent for leaders to lead.

This conference will take stock of what works and what doesn't work, and probe new methods for involving more people, with more voices, to get more work done. The conference is co-sponsored by:

- The *ACCORD3.0* Network
- The University of Hawai'i's Public Policy Center
- The William S. Richardson Law School at the University of Hawai'i
- Ulupono Initiative
- ThinkTech Hawai'i
- Honolulu Civil Beat,

The gathering will feature knowledgeable speakers and panelists on the first day, and specialized strategy sessions on the second. Registration is required and fees must be charged to cover the cost of a large and comfortable venue and good refreshments. To register, go to <http://www.accord3.com/pg1019.cfm>.

Peter S. Adler, PhD
Denise Antolini, Esq.
Jay Fidell, Esq.
Amy Hennessey
Keith Mattson
Colin Moore, PhD

Kathryn Ranney
Jana Wolff

(As individuals)