

Democracy in Planning

Enhancing democratic participation in San Diego's Community Planning Groups



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Report

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Executive Summary

Public participation is a cornerstone of city planning and a pillar of democracy. Everyone should have a voice in how decisions are made, especially in local government. In the City of San Diego, City-sponsored community planning Groups (CPGs) serve as the primary vehicle to facilitate public participation in the planning process. CPGs provide a space for community members to serve their City, and their input frequently improves development and transportation projects.

Unfortunately, not all voices have equal access to participate in CPGs. The structure of CPGs has allowed certain voices to become amplified, while excluding others. The CPG system in San Diego creates barriers to participation from new residents, and those residents that work, care for family members, or who have other obligations. These barriers undermine the purpose of CPGs to collect diverse and representative public input and to advance democratic participation.

Nationwide, jurisdictions have adopted a variety of mechanisms to form neighborhood-level planning groups to solicit input on planning and transportation choices. The structure of these local groups are as diverse as the jurisdictions themselves. Many also implement policies to ensure that a representative set of voices can access the community planning process.

In the City of San Diego, a City-wide policy sets the framework for how CPGs operate through Council Policy 600-24. Bylaws of individual CPGs must comply with 600-24. Nevertheless, wide discretion is left to individual CPGs for the actual mechanics of their election processes, and how to organize their meetings and agendas. This local control allows CPGs to adopt—or continue—policies that may have the effect of excluding certain voices from the CPG process. If CPGs become too insular and resistant to new voices, they can become weighted in favor of the status quo. CPGs that are not open to all voices cannot fairly advocate for policies that benefit everyone.

When CPGs are closed off to new and diverse voices, there can be real consequences. Neighborhood planning groups that make it difficult for new residents, often renters, from participating tend to oppose new housing construction, which artificially inflates rents. Restricting housing supply short-changes the housing needs of younger generations who don’t currently occupy seats at the table. Similarly, CPGs that oppose new bicycle lanes in favor of preserving parking spaces put the lives of bicycle riders in danger.

This report recommends that the San Diego City Council update Council Policy 600-24 to require that CPGs meet certain minimum thresholds for how elections are structured and how meetings operate. Such changes will allow more diverse participation in San Diego’s land use and planning decisions. With more diverse participation, local input on planning and transportation will be more likely to embrace policies that benefit wider segments of the population. Champions of the status quo deserve a voice in local planning policies, too, but they should not be allowed to exclude the voices of others.

- Prohibitions against policies that restrict the right of community members to vote in and stand for CPG elections.
- Agenda reform to ensure land use and transportation items are heard at the beginning of CPG meetings.
- Changes to term limits and continuing education to ensure new CPG members have an opportunity to serve as informed citizen planners.

Community input is essential to local land use and transportation decisions. CPGs should be structured to ensure that all community members have equitable access to the decisionmaking process. Common sense changes to the rules that govern CPGs can open up the planning process, improve outcomes, and advance our shared goals for democratic participation.

