



# COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

## AGENDA ITEM

### BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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First District

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Third District

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Fourth District

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Fifth District

**DATE:** February 28, 2023

**09**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

### **SUBJECT**

**PROMOTING GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY UPDATE: IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND BUILDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BOARDS, COMMITTEES, AND COMMISSIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

### **OVERVIEW**

The County reimaged its mission, vision, and values at the beginning of 2022, putting community engagement at the center of the County's operations to create a just, sustainable, and resilient future for all. A key component of creating this vision and supporting community engagement is access and participation in local government for all people, with a particular focus on increasing transparency among diverse audiences to encourage civic involvement. To work toward these goals, the Board of Supervisors approved a range of recommendations in separate actions on May 10, 2022 (8), and May 24, 2022 (10), which are outlined in the subsequent background section, and directed staff to return to the Board.

Due to the close alignment of the actions directed in both items to support community engagement, civic participation, and overall transparency, this report combines the summary of the staff's research, findings, and recommendations, and incorporates feedback received from County departments across the enterprise and the community.

### **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

#### **CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER**

1. Receive the report on actions related to government transparency and promoting civic engagement through boards, committees, and commissions.

### **EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

Boards, committees, and commissions (BCCs) are a mechanism for civic engagement. Racial and socioeconomic disparities exist across the nation in voter participation and public engagement. As noted in the May 10, 2022 (8) board letter, trends show that white people, older adults, and people with higher incomes and education levels vote at higher rates, and these demographics are more likely to be reflected in elected officials. The disparity continues when considering that residents who need policies to support them are less likely to receive support through representation. A 2019 review by the RAND Corporation found that civic engagement, through voting or other activities such as membership in civic organizations, is associated with better health outcomes. Civic

**SUBJECT: PROMOTING GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY UPDATE:  
IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BOARDS, COMMITTEES,  
AND COMMISSIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

participation is a key issue in the social and community context domain of Healthy People 2030, an initiative to improve health and well-being through data-driven national objectives. In addition, community involvement through volunteerism is one of *Live Well San Diego's* Top 10 Indicators and the rate of volunteer participation has decreased since 2009.

The updates presented in this report include reducing process barriers, encouraging diversity of representation, and conducting outreach to encourage civic participation among underrepresented groups.

**SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

The information presented in this report contributes to the County's efforts to engage the community in meaningful ways and promote an environment that provides equitable access to opportunities for public engagement and representation. These efforts will contribute to the County of San Diego Sustainability Goal No. 1 by "encourag[ing] people and diverse stakeholders to partner and participate in decisions that impact their lives and communities."

**FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no immediate fiscal impact associated with today's recommended actions, though they may result in future fiscal impacts. Staff will return to the Board for consideration and approval of any such impacts.

**BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

N/A

**ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

N/A

**BACKGROUND**

In May 2022, the Board of Supervisors approved recommendations to promote both government transparency and civic engagement through BCCs.

1. On May 10, 2022 (8), the Board of Supervisors directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to pursue four actions presented by the Transparency Committee to increase transparency, accessibility, and open government throughout the County enterprise. The actions outlined focused on enhancing the public's ability to access County public meetings through an analysis of all public meetings and the processes necessary to stream/record/post meeting proceedings online at a centralized location. In addition, the Board directed an assessment of community engagement within County programs to identify opportunities for improved collaboration with the public.
2. On May 24, 2022 (9), the Board unanimously approved recommendations to support the promotion of civic engagement through boards, committees, and commissions. Recommendations included approval of amendments to Board Policy A-74, "Participation in County Boards, Commissions, and Committees" and the development of a Code of

**SUBJECT: PROMOTING GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY UPDATE:  
IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BOARDS, COMMITTEES,  
AND COMMISSIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

Conduct for all appointees. Additional recommendations included a baseline diversity assessment and the development of recommendations to address gaps and encourage civic participation and transparency.

Due to the close alignment of the actions directed by the Board, this report combines the summary of staff's research, findings, and recommendations, and incorporates feedback received from County departments across the enterprise and the community into the following areas:

- Boards, Committees, and Commissions Assessment
- Public Meeting Accessibility
- Public Meeting Outreach/Promotion
- Community Engagement Assessment

The Board previously received reports on other items included in the aforementioned Board Letters: centralized Public Records Act management, updated email retention policy, archived public records database improvements, Inclusive and Equitable Communications Plan, revisions to Board Policy A-74, "Participation in County Boards, Commissions and Committees," and development of a Code of Conduct for members of boards and commissions.

For purpose of this letter, public meetings are defined as those meetings conducted by the County which are subject to the Brown Act.

**Boards, Committees, and Commissions Assessment**

On May 24, 2022 (10), the Board approved a substantial revision of Board Policy A-74, "Participation in County Boards, Commissions, and Committees." The revised Policy called for an initial Sunset Review of all boards, committees, and commissions, also referred to as BCCs, in 2022 to develop a baseline assessment to improve civic engagement and promote transparency, participation, and collaboration. The Sunset Review Report was distributed to the Board on December 20, 2022. The Board Policy directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to review the BCC responses, receive input from appropriate departments and agencies, and bring forward recommended changes during budget deliberations. In addition to the 59 BCCs that were subject to the Sunset Review process, staff also compiled similar data for the additional 43 County groups not subject to the Sunset Review process, such as planning and sponsor groups. This full analysis provided several areas for improvement which are described below.

- *Diversity Statistics*

In July 2022, the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors (COB) sent a voluntary demographic survey to all active members of BCCs that had a mailing address or email address on file (1,368). Of those, 310 responses were received. The survey contained questions regarding age, race/ethnicity, gender, and income. Each question provided an option to select "Decline to State." These questions were modeled after recent similar surveys, including the Independent Redistricting Commission, the Leon L. Williams Human Relations Commission, as well as job applicant surveys. The objective was to compare the current demographics of the County's BCC members with the demographics of San Diego County residents.

**SUBJECT: PROMOTING GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY UPDATE:  
IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BOARDS, COMMITTEES,  
AND COMMISSIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

With the assistance of the Office of Evaluation, Performance, and Analytics (OEPA), a comparative analysis was completed using the survey responses and data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) (5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample 2020). The data, included as Attachment B, suggests that certain populations are disproportionately overrepresented or underrepresented relative to the County's population. For example, approximately 67% of all respondents to the demographic survey identified as age 55 or older, whereas the ACS data reports a population share of only 33% indicating an underrepresentation of youth and younger adults. While the factors contributing to the underrepresentation of youth and younger adults on BCCs are unknown and the survey results may not accurately reflect the overall BCC composition due to a low response rate (common for surveys), the results still provide useful insights to assist in focusing outreach efforts. Subsequent community input shared suggests that time constraints due to school, employment, or the limited availability of committee positions for youth may contribute to low participation rates.

The data from this analysis serves as a baseline to assist in monitoring underrepresented groups for growth over time. The COB also recently implemented an online application for BCC positions that includes demographic questions as part of the application process. This will enable the regular collection of demographic information as new members are appointed to committees. The COB will continue working with OEPA and leverage their expertise to evaluate the demographic questions and determine if changes may improve the accuracy of future comparative analysis and allow for a more thorough comparison with available data. After review and research, additional demographic questions may be considered in the future such as ones addressing accessibility and disabilities.

- *Language Accessibility*  
Assessment results reported that 42% of BCCs provide language accessibility; however, most indicated they have not received any translation or interpretation services requests. Recommendations for expanding language accessibility specific to BCCs are included in the subsequent section "Public Meeting Accessibility," which includes recommendations for both language services and online accessibility.
- *Transparency Efforts*  
Through the aforementioned Sunset Review and staff analysis, it was found that 56% of BCCs currently have meetings accessible virtually, either via an online platform, such as Zoom, or through a call-in line. Also, 17% provide the ability for the public to submit comments online regarding agenda items.

To enhance the accessibility of BCC meetings, the CAO is implementing an Administrative Manual Policy (Attachment A) that provides standards to manage and support County BCCs. Through the policy, staff will ensure that BCCs provide the ability for the public to submit comments remotely on agenda items, such as through an online form, call-in system, or other service. Additional strategies to significantly broaden access to BCCs and

**SUBJECT: PROMOTING GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY UPDATE:  
IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BOARDS, COMMITTEES,  
AND COMMISSIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

other public meetings are outlined in the following section specific to Public Meeting Accessibility.

- *Staff Time*  
Findings about staff time were included in the aforementioned Sunset Review report to the Board on December 20, 2022. The CAO will bring forward any recommendations for County staff support of BCCs during budget deliberations.

The following sections identify strategies and resources to help address some of the gaps identified in the assessment, and reflect public input gathered in a subsequent survey and engagement.

**Public Meeting Accessibility**

Through the BCC assessment as well as additional community input activities, staff identified additional gaps and strategies to increase accessibility.

- *Expanding Access to Public Meeting Information*
  - BCC website and application portal: The Clerk of the Board of Supervisors (COB) released a new system for the public to access information about BCCs. First, the COB worked with the County Technology Office’s Digital Experience Team to streamline the BCC information page, making it easier to understand and use, simplifying language, and prioritizing important resources. Secondly, a new portal now makes it easier for individuals to apply to serve on a BCC. It also allows constituents to see up-to-date information about which positions are currently vacant as well as the expectations for the roles.
  - Onboarding training and a how-to guide for BCCs: BCCs will now receive guidance on conducting hybrid meetings including information on the necessary equipment and tools to stream and record meetings and post meeting recordings online. Resources will be shared with BCC liaisons and on the COB intranet site and other platforms as appropriate. Meetings that are recorded may be hosted on the County’s YouTube channel and links made available online to the public. The onboarding training and how-to guide will also include language service and accessibility resources as well as guidance for promoting public meetings to meet the needs of the region’s diverse population.
  - How-to-guide for the public: Resources will be shared on the new BBC portal website and promoted through additional County platforms such as the Community Engagement Hub – *Engagement Center*, County News Center, and social media to inform the public about how to access public meeting details, participate in meetings and request language and accessibility services.
  - Clerk of the Board Twitter account: The COB launched a Twitter account in October 2022 specifically focused on Board of Supervisors meetings. COB staff tweets updates during the meeting on which discussion items are coming up so the

**SUBJECT: PROMOTING GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY UPDATE:  
IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BOARDS, COMMITTEES,  
AND COMMISSIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

public knows when to come to the Chamber or call in to provide comments. The Twitter account is <https://twitter.com/SDBoardClerk>. The department looked at other solutions, such as texting apps, but all required individuals to opt-in and relied on technology that may cause delays in messages being received. While Twitter has its limitations, it does allow users to easily share information and anyone to follow/unfollow the feed and provides the ability to display the feed on the agenda web page for non-Twitter users.

- *Ensuring Language Accessibility*  
As included earlier in the response, recommendations for BCCs include expanded onboarding training and how-to guides for BCC members, BCC staff liaisons, and the public which include resources for language and accessibility services, both on how to provide such services and how to request them.

**Public Meeting Outreach and Promotion**

Beyond the Sunset Review report, staff gathered input from staff liaisons who conduct community engagement and work directly with BCCs, BCC members, and the public to identify barriers and potential strategies to promote participation in BCCs and encourage overall civic participation and transparency. Engagement included an internal staff questionnaire, online engagement on the Engage San Diego County website, and additional input from youth and community advocates.

The feedback pointed to a lack of information about BCCs as a primary barrier to participation. While 68% of the BCCs surveyed in the aforementioned assessment reported having a webpage and 77% reported that agendas and minutes are available online, for many, information about the BCCs including meeting notices and materials is limited and hard to find. Others shared that information, when available, is largely posted on platforms that are not known, readily accessed, or aligned with a majority public, and often, the information is not shared well enough in advance of a meeting thereby hindering their full participation. Limited resources to support BCCs with administrative tasks or hosting a website were some of the challenges current BCC representatives shared regarding why it can be difficult to communicate with the public. Expanding information about BCCs, a centralized calendar of meetings, and notifying the public through email and social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter were cited by survey respondents as preferred methods to learn about BCCs and BCC public meetings.

Virtual meetings were identified as an opportunity to facilitate greater and more diverse participation in BCCs, but challenges with online meeting accessibility such as unreliable internet connections and digital equipment, lack of familiarity with online meeting platforms, and limited considerations for accessibility for persons with disabilities, specifically the deaf and hard of hearing, can present significant barriers. In addition, with the lifting of the COVID-19 State of Emergency, the ability of BCCs to hold virtual meetings is limited. A new state law, AB 2449, provides individual members of BCCs the ability to participate in meetings via teleconference under specific circumstances, such as due to a personal emergency; however, there are constraints to the number of times per calendar year a BCC member can participate virtually in meetings, and a majority of each BCC must participate in person. The County will continue to encourage hybrid

**SUBJECT: PROMOTING GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY UPDATE:  
IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BOARDS, COMMITTEES,  
AND COMMISSIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

meetings to allow for virtual public participation and provide resources as listed in the previous section.

Other barriers included a lack of resources needed to support participation in BCCs such as transportation, childcare, and overall availability of time with some citing that the day and time that BCC meetings are scheduled often conflict with school and/or work schedules.

A series of strategies have been captured within an initial Communications and Engagement Plan to promote both awareness of and more diverse participation in BCCs and public meetings. Strategies in the plan include:

- *BCC 101 Video*: A brief explanation of BCCs, their purpose, and roles, how people can participate, and where additional information can be found. (Completed)
- *“Why I Serve” Campaign*: Highlights of current BCC members that report the benefit of serving on a BCC. (In development)

The videos will be promoted via County social media, websites, and other owned platforms.

Public input directly informed the Public Meeting Accessibility efforts listed in the previous section. Additional strategies will continue to be explored and considered in future iterations of the Plan. A workgroup with staff representatives from across the organization will be convened in Q4 of Fiscal Year 2022-23 to explore and pursue additional strategies presented by stakeholders.

### **Community Engagement Assessment**

On May 10, 2022, (8), the Board directed the CAO to develop and conduct an assessment of community engagement within County programs. An inventory of community engagement strategies used across the enterprise was conducted in the spring of 2022 and updated in January 2023. In addition to the over 100 BCCs that regularly advise the County, staff employs a variety of communication, outreach, and engagement strategies to connect with the communities they serve.

- *Communications*  
The SanDiegoCounty.gov website provides the public with information about each of its departments and details on specific programs, services, and projects. Through the County’s GovDelivery system, community members can opt-in to receive updates on the topics they care most about. Currently, over 900,000 community members have subscribed to one or more 200 available topics. With more people turning to social platforms to engage with news content and obtain information, 41 social media accounts across 22 departments offer residents an opportunity to receive County information through their preferred channels. In addition to County News Center and County TV, critical information related to COVID-19 and Monkeypox was also made available through SMS/text messages reaching over 82,000 people. In September 2022, the County launched the ‘Engagement Center’ webpage, an information hub to highlight active and upcoming County public input opportunities and other engagement resources countywide in one centralized location.

**SUBJECT: PROMOTING GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY UPDATE:  
IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BOARDS, COMMITTEES,  
AND COMMISSIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

- *Outreach*

Across the County, departments implement a wide range of outreach programs to raise awareness and ensure access to County services. From resource fairs and community presentations to educational programs and conferences delivered in coordination with community partners, staff is reaching people where they are and cultivating authentic relationships. The County works closely with community partners from different sectors across key County initiatives such as sustainability, housing, and health, to name a few, to ensure connections are made with all San Diego communities with an emphasis on diverse and underrepresented populations.

- *Engagement*

As part of the County's commitment to center community engagement in all aspects of County business, the County has implemented initiatives to further elevate its engagement efforts. Community engagement processes are now reflected in programs, policies, and projects that customarily did not include opportunities for public input in the development process. Traditional community engagement activities such as public meetings, surveys, and advisory groups, have been enhanced through technology tools and creative approaches to promote more accessible participation. This includes offering expanded language services and accommodations for persons with disabilities. As part of a series of engagement initiatives outlined in spring 2022 as part of the government transparency framework, the County has added a Community Engagement Manager and Language Services Manager to the County Communications Office to ensure all departments and programs are embedding engagement into their operations. Engagement responsibilities are now reflected in existing and new positions created across the organization. A toolkit of communications and engagement resources has been developed and is fully accessible to staff on the employee Intranet page. In addition to *Engagement Center*, an online engagement platform *Engage San Diego County* is now available to make it easy for every San Diegan to engage with a variety of County projects online at their convenience. To date, the platform has been used to provide information and collect community input on the Capital Improvements Needs Assessment, Regional Decarbonization Framework, and Comprehensive Broadband Plan, among others.

- *Ongoing Assessment Framework*

While the assessment outlined in this section identifies significant progress in multiple facets of community engagement, best practices research conducted by a cross-departmental community engagement team also informed the need for an expanded and ongoing community engagement assessment for the County using a common framework. Through research into viable methods for assessing quality community engagement, staff identified the International Association for Public Participation also known as IAP2. IAP2's three pillars for effective public participation (Code of Ethics, Core Values, and Spectrum of Public Participation) will serve as the framework for the assessment tool which will be developed in consultation with OEPA. This approach enables staff to move beyond community engagement techniques and tactics, as identified in the initial inventory,



**SUBJECT: PROMOTING GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY UPDATE:  
IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BOARDS, COMMITTEES,  
AND COMMISSIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

to assess community engagement process design with considerations for equity, diversity, and accessibility. As part of the assessment, staff will identify evaluation criteria to measure both the outputs and outcomes of the County’s community engagement efforts including performance indicators for continual assessment. The assessment will be conducted by the end of Q2 in Fiscal Year 2023-24.

The results of the expanded assessment will inform current and future initiatives to expand the County’s commitment to community engagement with an emphasis on establishing guidelines for a comprehensive, consistent, objectives-driven, and values-based approach to community engagement across the enterprise.


**Final Summary**

In summary, the findings and actions outlined above, coupled with recommendations previously approved by the Board, support expanded access and participation in local government for all people, with a particular focus on increasing transparency among diverse audiences to encourage civic involvement and public participation.

**LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

Today’s proposed action supports the Community Initiative of the County of San Diego’s 2023-2028 Strategic Plan by expanding accessibility and transparency to participate in and know about County Boards, Committees, and Commissions.

Respectfully submitted,



HELEN N. ROBBINS-MEYER  
Chief Administrative Officer

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

- A. CAO Administrative Policy 0020-14, “Boards, Committees, and Commissions Support Standards”
- B. Board, Committee, and Commission (BCC) Demographic Data Analysis