January 23, 2021

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Dear Alex and colleagues:

As professors of law, policy, and political science at the University of California, we are developing a new, research-based model for resident engagement on housing policy. Our model enables substantive, constructive and what we call "deliberative" engagement between planning officials and local residents. We are hoping your planning department would be interested in collaborating with us on a project to demonstrate and improve a new technology for engaging residents in land use planning.

Our basic idea is to supplement the traditional "shouting model" of public-hearing participation with a "dialogue and learning model," using a free, web-based online town-hall platform called Prytaneum. Developed by TeCD-Lab at UC Riverside, Prytaneum is a new platform that allows public officials to address questions and comments posed by members of the public while, in real time, the public participants comment on and "like" one another's questions. A neutral moderator, aided by Prytaneum's artificial intelligence tools, decides which constituent-suggested questions to pose to the public official(s). The AI also filters out toxic comments.

Prytaneum's AI is trained to group similar questions together; to prioritize questions from demographic groups that tend to be under-represented in public hearings on land-use matters (e.g., renters and people of color); and to prioritize questions that receive cross-ideological or cross-demographic "likes" (e.g. a question from a renter that was "liked" by homeowners).

Prytaneum also provides an option to make the meeting record available to the public after the conclusion of the event. When this option is enabled, the video of the event along with all of the public's questions and comments are posted to an interactive website where members of the public, planning officials and other government officials can continue the conversation.

Participants will be given balanced, factual material to read in advance of the online event. We will also survey participants before and after the event. The background material, and the survey questions, can be tailored to your priorities.

We anticipate that public participation through the Prytaneum platform will:

- Help planners identify zones of consensus, or relative consensus, among the members of the public who participate in the event.
- Increase participants' trust in the planning department and their sense of political efficacy.
- Increase participants' substantive understanding of relevant tradeoffs and constraints.
- Cause participants to become more supportive, or at least understanding, of policies to redress citywide or regionwide problems, even if this means that their own neighborhood may undergo some change.
- Cause white-homeowner participants to become more supportive, or at least understanding, of policies favored by renter- and people-of-color participants.
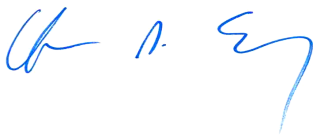
We intend to rigorously test these hypotheses by using a "civic lottery" to randomly assign subsets of the interested public to "treatment" and "control" conditions. Residents assigned to the treatment condition will be invited to the Prytaneum town hall. Those assigned to the control condition will be given the background readings but will not participate in the town hall. By comparing responses to the post-event survey from the treatment and control groups, we will be able to identify the effects of this novel form of public participation, much as medical researchers identify the effect of a new drug by comparing the outcomes of people who were randomly assigned to treatment and control conditions.

We are making this proposal because we hope to improve public participation and land-use policymaking, not because of any financial interest. If you choose to collaborate with us, we would not charge anything for our services. We would help recruit participants and a moderator for the event. We could also help prepare background readings for the event (although we'd prefer mainly to be a conduit for materials you'd like to share).

Finally, prior to the real event, we'd provide an opportunity for the planners and moderator to "test drive" Prytaneum before an audience of University of California students. During this pre-test event, we'd use exactly the same background materials and format. The point is to get everyone comfortable with the format and web-based interface before going "live" with members of the general public.

If you and your team are interested in this proposal, please let us know and we'll schedule a Zoom meeting to discuss it in more detail.

Regards,

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