Public engagement isn't something that has just one definition, and so I think it's important to acknowledge that from the start. It's up to us as a city to define what we mean by public engagement, and so for that reason alone I think this is a topic that requires, and is benefited by, continual discussion and input from any and all publics willing to weigh in on it. It's also something that I don't expect all staff to be well versed in. I think this is hard stuff, especially when done well. I've been working at it for over a decade, and am still learning about best and/or emerging practices every day. And so I cringe every time I write public engagement, because it's almost meaningless as a term. It's all about defining public and engagement, right?

In the commission meeting where I brought this up, it was in the spirit of trying to respond to one of City Council's goals to increase and improve public engagement in all of our city activities and programs. My specific comments were meant to spark some conversation around a couple of points:

1. One type of public engagement, though not very creative, is to actively engage your current commissions and committees as the first line of public engagement. Doing this, however, needs to only begin with providing "reports." Hopefully your commissioners can be thought partners for you, grappling with some of the challenges of the hard work that you've all be tasked to do. In this way, it's less a show and tell (even while it is critical to provide relevant information to us), and more of a development process to talk through, and indeed elicit, specific feedback. As our meetings are currently run I sometimes feel as though the feedback provided is perceived as somehow critical of personnel, rather than oriented towards reaching a common goal.

2. A report, at least in my world, is most helpful when it's specific and geared towards a particular challenge. So my request for a discussion around public engagement wasn't to get a report on how we do public engagement in the city. Sure, that's a good starting point. But what I was asking for was:

   a. Historically, how have we done public engagement (the current report gives an overall list of this), and how has it worked? How hasn't it worked? What kind of public engagement works for what kinds of projects? Where do we need to build out what we do? I think this is the kind of topic where I would so very much appreciate staff expertise to analyze how we've done public engagement in the past, and how hasn't it worked (and what's worked well. Why do they think it worked well? What particular strategies were utilized, and how might they be adapted in other situations). I could tell you so many ways I've done public engagement and gotten it wrong for the UC. I am looking for something similar from city staff if we're going to talk about public engagement. Otherwise I don't think there's much to discuss. Most of us are probably pretty familiar with the forms of public engagement we can employ. The devil's in the details, yes?

   b. Public engagement isn't a one-and-done agenda item. It's not like a tree removal request. It's a process that involves living people and on a vast scope of projects (about to become even more vast) and so is dynamic. By dynamic I mean ever evolving and changing. Really, I think "public engagement," which we do need to grapple with in terms of how we collectively understand and define it, is something that needs to be built into other agenda items. This might be a stretch, but I think about it like I think about diversity, equity, and inclusion. It needs to be run throughout all of our work, and isn't a task to be checked off. It needs to be baked into the structure of much of what we do.

   c. My idea, at least at this point, would be to create some sort of helpful set of guidelines about public engagement that could be utilized as we do the work of the city (internally or via commissions). This is a half-baked idea, I know, but even if we had a series of questions for staff to consider as they're doing events and programs, it might begin to move us in the direction of grappling with the complexities of engaging our various publics.

When I read the staff report on public engagement, it struck me that one key element that was missing was an acknowledgement and analysis of the closed loops of communication. City social media is one way to get the word out. But what's our reach with that? Can we have access to an analysis of who we're reaching with that? How has social media led to various outcomes (do we have surveys, for example, that capture how people learn about Barkfest, for example? What role does social media play in that?). How do we reach publics that might be invested in our work, but who don't attend city council meetings or follow our social media? How do we reach publics who don't attend city programs or utilize the city facility where they might see a flyer? The closed loop conversation is a hard one, but it's about broadening the reach of our work.

I'm wondering why the most recent The Spotlight didn't advertise any of the outreach we're going to do regarding public engagement on any of our projects? Considering the reach of the publication, and the financial investment in printing, this seems like a lost opportunity (admittedly, if we want to keep in mind my argument re: closed loops of communication, we'd utilize the back as a "We want to hear from you!" advert to people to seek their input). Something to consider.

Of course multiple languages is critical to public engagement, and I was glad to see that advertisements for Shalimar and Ketchum sessions were in two languages. Thank you for that. The challenge, however, is that I'm only learning of the meeting 3 days in advance of the meeting. I just don't think we can actually count this as public engagement if we give so little time to get the word out to people. As a busy working mom I'll admit that I'm booked weeks in advance. Am I willing to move around my schedule for something important? Maybe–depends on how you ask I suppose, and how important I understand it to be. And this is where I think we can be more purposeful in terms of our solicitation. Time is the most precious resource for many of us. We need time to do this public engagement well. Otherwise it feels like we're just checking off a box (did we send out flyers? Check.).

For me, good public engagement is all about the democratic process. It's a requirement of good government, and I'd very much like to be a partner to help think through ways we can try to do public engagement for all of the upcoming projects.

Kelly Anne Brown, PhD
Director, Media Relations and Communications | UC Irvine School of Humanities
Commissioner, Parks and Community Services | City of Costa Mesa