

A vintage pocket watch with a leather strap is shown open, resting on a map of the San Francisco Bay Area. The watch face is visible, showing the numbers 1 through 12. The map in the background features various geographical labels and a compass rose. The entire scene is set against a dark, textured background.

ARABELLA ANALYTICAL REPORT

November 2011

# *E*nvision Bay Area

Evaluation of an Effort to Increase  
Participation in Regional Planning  
Among Bay Area Residents

PRESENTED TO:

Silicon Valley  
Community Foundation

**Arabella**  
PHILANTHROPIC INVESTMENT ADVISORS

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## Introduction

This report presents findings from our investigation of the impact of Envision Bay Area (EBA). EBA was a two-year strategic initiative led by the Silicon Valley Community Foundation ('the Foundation') to encourage public participation in the regional planning process (Plan Bay Area). The initiative was in direct response to California legislation (AB 32 and AB 375) that requires public participation in the development of a regional plan to reduce carbon emissions while accommodating growth in population and jobs. As such, it was partially funded by a Community Information Challenge grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Envision Bay Area sought to broaden and diversify the circle of residents who are involved in the regional planning process by supporting the development and promoting the use of an interactive web-based tool ('YouChoose') designed to help residents understand the trade-offs between various planning priorities (e.g., housing, traffic, costs and taxes, air quality), and by joining with the regional planning agencies - the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) - to deliver a series of 10 community forums held in the nine Bay Area counties<sup>1</sup>. The forums incorporated the YouChoose approach as a key framework for the conversations. Collaboration with Bay Area public radio and television stations was also planned. The initiative was a partnership between the Foundation, Greenbelt Alliance, TransForm, the urban planning firm Calthorpe Associates, and Northern California Public Broadcasting.

We fielded an online survey for two weeks in Fall 2011, asking for responses from residents who either completed the YouChoose prioritization process via the website, attended a community forum, or did both, and had provided their email addresses at the close of their participation. We conducted interviews with key stakeholders during the same time period. Our findings can be considered alongside what has been learned from other primary sources, such as keypad polling done at the community forums and user metrics gleaned from the YouChoose website. The following sections will present our findings related to the three research questions our inquiry was designed to address:

- To what extent has EBA reached and engaged residents in the public policy process? To what extent have people been brought into the process that had not been involved previously?
- To what extent are residents who participated either via the YouChoose website or public forums poised to be informed about – and involved in – the continuing regional planning process?
- What did organizations that partnered with the Foundation on this initiative take away from it?

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<sup>1</sup> One forum took place in each county with the exception of Alameda, where two were held.

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## Engaging Residents in Regional Planning

**Outreach conducted by the Foundation and other stakeholders brought residents who had not previously been involved into the regional planning process.** Nearly 25 percent of survey respondents who attended one of the community forums had never previously attended a public meeting or workshop on regional planning in the Bay Area. Twenty-one percent of those who completed the YouChoose prioritization process online had never before accessed information about regional planning on the Internet. During our interviews, one stakeholder mentioned that the process had brought in more involvement from the business community, an interest group that had been underrepresented in the public process for a number of years.

As expected, both the forums and the website also attracted people who were already well-engaged with the regional planning process. Forty-one percent of those who attended a forum had attended more than three previous meetings on similar topics. The diversity in terms of participants' previous exposure to the topic suggests that the forums, in particular, provided an opportunity for residents with various backgrounds and expertise to listen to and learn from each other.

**Our key informants, while definitely pleased with the new contingent of participants brought in, acknowledged that there is more that can be done.** MTC and ABAG have partnered with community-based organizations to deliver a series of workshops intentionally designed to involve residents from groups with less social capital in the planning process (e.g., low-income or immigrant communities). Our key informants also raised the issue of how well the forums and online tool accommodated diversity of opinion. The content of the online tool – which shaped the content of the forums to some extent – intentionally focused on environmental, equity, and health issues. To the EBA team, state legislation requiring a reduction in carbon emissions requires this emphasis. While economic considerations were integrated into the tool as well, at least one stakeholder felt that economic priorities were not adequately highlighted. Since the nexus between 'green' choices and 'economic' choices are where a lot of the hard decisions have to be made – and where some of the most innovative solutions can be found – it may be the case that the dialog that the tool fosters about tradeoffs and priorities is not as optimally comprehensive as it could be. On a related note, stakeholders we spoke with felt that the unanticipated presence of Tea Party members at several of the forums actually challenged the presenters to be ready with answers to tough questions, a positive outcome in hindsight.

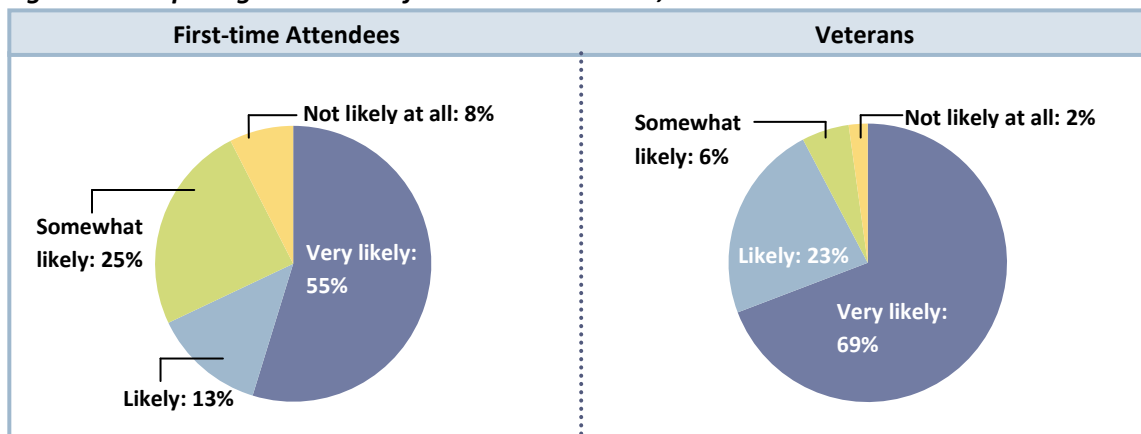
## Sustaining Engagement and Participation

**Completing the YouChoose tool online and/or attending one of the community forums has motivated individuals new to regional planning to maintain a higher level of involvement than they previously had.** For example, 22 percent of those surveyed who had *never accessed online information* about regional planning before engaging with the YouChoose website reported reading, watching, or listening to media about regional planning a good deal more frequently since then. Nearly 29 percent of this same subgroup thought it was very likely that they will be involved with local or regional planning in the future.

Nearly three-quarters of those who had *never attended a public meeting* about planning before the community forum were seeking out media related to regional planning either slightly more than before (36 percent) or a good deal more frequently than before (36 percent), respectively. Fully 55 percent of those attending a public meeting about regional planning for the first time believe it is very likely that they will be involved with local or regional planning in the future.

**Overall, more than three-quarters of the respondents are likely (21.5 percent) or very likely (56 percent) to be involved with local or regional planning issues in the future.** Non-whites were somewhat less likely to be involved in the future than Whites; there were no differences by age group or gender. Respondents who had been engaged in the past (whether by accessing online information about regional planning or by attending previous meetings) were more likely to be involved in the future than those who had not been engaged in the past.<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 1 below.)

**Figure 1. Comparing Likelihood of Future Involvement, First-Time Attendees and Veterans<sup>3</sup>**



**The substantial portion of newcomers that expects to remain involved suggests that there’s an opportunity for stakeholders to maintain contact with participants, via e-mailed updates on the planning process, meeting notices, etc., in particular to ‘nudge’ new participants to maintain their**

<sup>2</sup> All group differences reported were statistically significant (unless otherwise noted).

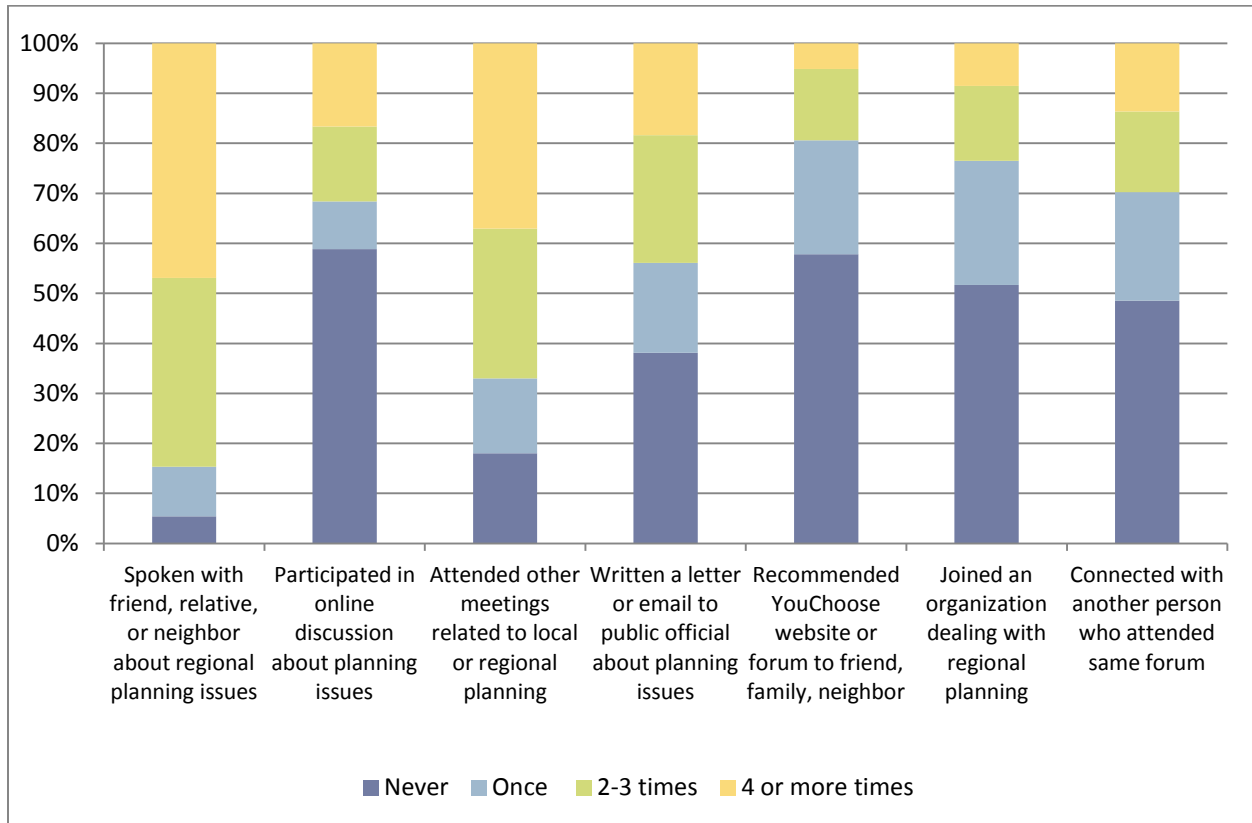
<sup>3</sup> A first-time attendee is someone who had attended no previous meetings (on the left); a ‘veteran’ had attended and three or more previous meetings related to regional planning before participating in Envision Bay Area.

**involvement.** A more interventionist approach that may or may not be practical would be to create a buddy system, where seasoned participants serve as mentors to those who, having engaged with the planning process via EBA, wish to expand their involvement or the involvement of their specific community.

**Those who participated in EBA are currently engaging in behaviors that extend their involvement in the regional planning process. This is true for both veterans and those new to the regional planning process.** It would be incorrect to assume that these activities are a direct *result* of EBA; however, the survey was able to gauge the extent to which participants as a whole represent an engaged body of residents, a tap-able resource for the agencies charged with maintaining public participation in the lengthy regional planning process.

Figure 2, below, shows the overall percentages of surveyed participants who have engaged in each of seven behaviors.

**Figure 2. Behaviors since Participating in Envision Bay Area**



**Nearly half (47 percent) of survey respondents had spoken with a friend, relative, or neighbor *at least four times* since attending the forum and/or completing the online YouChoose tool.** Newcomers and relative newcomers were just as likely to have these conversations as veterans. Such activity is far from trivial: Since regional planning tends to occur ‘under the radar’ of various traditional and online news

outlets, word-of-mouth is likely to be critical for spreading news and building additional interest in regional planning within communities.

Interestingly, more than half (58 percent) of participants had never recommended the YouChoose website to a friend, relative, or neighbor. This may suggest that the EBA website could have done a better job of promoting the sharing of the site with others in one's community or social network.

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## Impact of Envision Bay Area on Stakeholder Organizations

**The key informants believe that their organizations benefitted from their participation in Envision Bay Area.<sup>4</sup> EBA provided a model of working together that was a departure from the tendency to move along on parallel yet separate tracks.** One stakeholder commented that ‘[Envision Bay Area] has been most effective behind the scenes.’ For example, developing the YouChoose tool required the creation of growth scenarios, overseen by an advisory group whose members represented various viewpoints, e.g., a focus on housing equity or on the preservation of open space. The partnering between a community foundation, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and a technical expert (Calthorpe Associates) led to a broad and thoughtful project, according to one stakeholder.

From the perspective of a regional planner, we heard that the benefit was “an ability to synthesize and converge very different perspectives on how the region could grow and develop. We were not necessarily that great at bringing different perspectives into a simple message before. [The various stakeholders] are four different entities with completely different languages. The project really allowed us to articulate and come together to figure out what are the strengths we bring, and when there are clashes, how to resolve them.”

**The Foundation received high marks from key informants for its role promoting public participation and maintaining neutrality on an issue that is implicitly value-laden.** Stakeholder comments echoed what we found among survey respondents. i.e., that EBA broadened the range of people who attend planning meetings. In particular, ABAG and MTC had grown used to seeing the ‘usual suspects’ at meetings; many in this group attend because their work is directly related to the topic. Partnering with EBA to produce the set of forums added to their awareness of the importance of making sure the concerns of various constituencies are represented in decision making. One of the government stakeholders mentioned that it would be valuable to continue working with the Foundation on outreach, and that the experience encouraged them to explore the possibility of working with other community foundations in the Bay Area.

The issue of neutrality is a provocative one, since by definition the state mandate to reduce carbon emissions – a key driver of the regional planning process – is aligned with the values of environmental and other advocates. Having representatives of advocacy organizations and policymakers jointly present at community forums was problematic for some participants. When members of the Tea Party attended forums and accused the forums of a bias towards green activists, the regional planning agencies responded by making sure that the specific public agenda was clear, as were the contributions of each presenter. A small number of survey respondents expressed their frustration with the process overall, seeing it as ‘insular’ or worse. Comments such as ‘[I will stay involved to avoid the] destruction of private property rights in my local area’ and ‘Let the buyers and the market decide rather than forcing people into limited high-density solutions’ convey the partisanship that regional planning can provoke.

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<sup>4</sup> Our key informants came from Greenbelt Alliance, Calthorpe and Associates, Association of Bay Area Governments, and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Stakeholders commented on the difficulty of incorporating diverse perspectives into the planning process, while recognizing the legitimacy that is gained by doing so.

**Our key informants believe that the YouChoose tool met its objectives of bringing technical information to the public in thoughtful, understandable ways.** It filled a need for content that is informed by the data but digestible and not too technical. One stakeholder commented, “We had been producing very dense content; they translated all of this for us. It still had much of the substance (was not ‘lightened up’), but it was a thoughtful translation compared to technical language.” We also heard various comments that the accuracy of the YouChoose tool allows both advocacy groups and regional agencies to have more confidence in the numbers and metrics they use for modeling and projecting. This highly significant outcome could have a potentially lasting impact on both the advocacy and planning communities. If plans are not already in the works to capitalize on this outcome, we recommend pursuing them.

**Stakeholders mentioned that the involvement of KQED public radio and KTEH public television did not result in the hoped-for connections between the programmatic content of those stations and the YouChoose prioritization approach.** Initially, the broad audiences reached by the stations were seen as a potential source of new participants for the community forums as well. A link to the EBA website is indeed featured on KQED’s Climate Watch page, but ultimately the programming produced by the stations did not directly map onto the regional planning issues that EBA addresses, so the tie-in was not as direct as had been initially conceived.

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## Implications of the Findings

**Synthesizing what we learned from the survey and the key informant interviews, two themes emerge for next steps.** First, given that EBA was able to introduce a substantial new group of residents to the regional planning process, and that the process is ongoing, how can these new participants be encouraged to remain involved? We learned from the survey that many of them intend to do so, but some form of external reminder or ‘nudge’ may help reinforce that intention. That reminder could come, for example, in the form of emailed updates on the progress of the Plan Bay Area process, or simply reminders to visit the Plan Bay Area website, which contains a calendar of community meetings and other events. Continued participation by these newcomers will hopefully also have a ripple effect, through word-of-mouth and other communications, that brings more newcomers into the process. We believe that a key take-away for the stakeholders may have been a renewed interest in outreach as an effective way to achieve the mandated level of participation in the regional planning process.

**Secondly, it remains to be seen how stakeholders are able to capitalize upon the extensive work that went into the development of the YouChoose tool.** We did hear from our key informant who worked directly on tool development that the investment will inform work in other communities and regions, and thus has been a gift of sorts to the planning community. The feedback we received about the tool suggests that it would be a valuable resource for continued use in schools and a variety of other community settings.

## Characteristics of Survey Respondents and Selected Additional Findings

About half of the respondents (n=294) were between 45 and 64 years of age; nearly a third were younger than that, with those over 65 years of age making up the balance. Women were slightly more represented than men, and all non-White ethnicities combined to constitute about 20% of the sample.

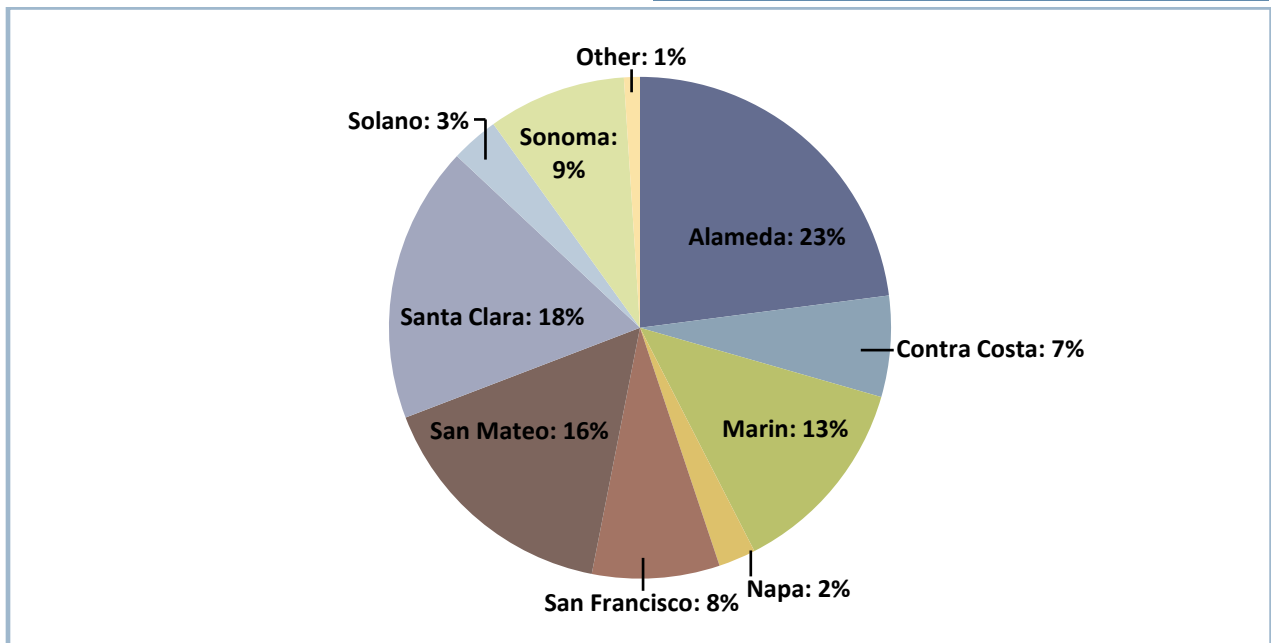
Among the 294 survey respondents, 55% (n = 163) of had participated in both the YouChoose online tool and one of the community forums. Twenty percent (n = 58) had attended a forum only, and 25% (n = 73) had worked only with the YouChoose website. These proportions did not vary by gender, age group, or ethnicity.

Survey respondents live in all nine counties in which the community forums were held. The largest portions live in Alameda County (23%) and Santa Clara County (18%), which were also the two counties with the largest number of forum attendees. San Mateo and Marin counties also each accounted for more than 10% of the total respondents.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Respondents**

	Number <sup>5</sup>	Percent
Age		
<i>Under 25</i>	7	2%
<i>25 - 44</i>	85	30%
<i>45 - 64</i>	141	49%
<i>65 +</i>	54	19%
Gender		
<i>Female</i>	157	55%
<i>Male</i>	127	45%
Ethnicity		
<i>White</i>	224	79%
<i>Latino</i>	13	5%
<i>African-American</i>	5	2%
<i>Asian, Pac. Islander</i>	24	8%
<i>Mixed; Other</i>	18	6%

**Figure 3. Respondents' County of Residence.**



<sup>5</sup> Percentages are calculated based on the available data. The total count for each characteristic sums to less than the total number in the sample due to missing data.

Given that the website was designed to help residents understand the tradeoffs that are inherent to regional planning, we asked survey respondents to gauge how effective their use of the site had been in this regard. As shown in Table 2, more than half (a combined 56%) feel that the tradeoffs are either somewhat clearer or much clearer. Revealingly, the website had the most impact in this regard among those who had never sought information on regional planning online before; 27% of respondents in this group (compared to 18% overall) noted that the choices and trade-offs are much clearer.

	Number	Percent
Choices and trade-offs are less clear to me than before.	14	5%
Choices and trade-offs are about as clear to me as before.	115	39%
Choices and trade-offs are somewhat clearer to me.	112	38%
Choices and trade-offs are much clearer to me.	53	18%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>100%</b>

While we were not able to implement a semi-controlled study that would have examined changes in participants' behaviors before and after their participation in EBA, we did learn about the level of engagement of participants approximately 5 months after the forums concluded. These results are shown in Figure 2 on page 4. As noted above, it would be incorrect to assume that these activities are a direct *result* of EBA; however, the survey was able to gauge the extent to which participants - as a whole - represent an engaged body of residents, a resource for the agencies charged with maintaining public participation in the lengthy regional planning process.

We report above on some of the differences in behaviors and intended behaviors between newcomers and veterans of the regional planning process. We were also interested to see if there were any differences in knowledge, intentions, or behavior related to whether a survey respondent had participated via the online tool only (n=73) or a community forum only (n=58).<sup>6</sup> Interesting, the two types of involvement were equally effective in building knowledge regarding the tradeoffs, but there were differences in intentions and behaviors.

- There was no difference between these 2 groups in the extent to which they understand the tradeoffs involved in regional planning.
- Fifty-two percent of those who attended the forum were very likely to remain involved, compared to 41 percent of those who engaged with the website only.
- Fifty-five percent of those who attended a forum had had four or more conversations with friends, family, and neighbors about regional planning, compared to 38 percent of those who engaged with the website only.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> We omitted from this particular analysis those who had participated via both the website and forum.

<sup>7</sup> While substantively meaningful, these differences are not statistically significant, in part due to the relatively small cell sizes in the statistical tests.