



Written by [Dan Titus](#) on May 29, 2025

## How Grants Undermine Local Control

Grants are often portrayed as benevolent tools for community improvement, providing much-needed funds for public projects. However, the terms and conditions attached to these grants can erode local governmental processes, favoring external agendas over the will of residents. This article explores how grant structures can usurp local control, skew public participation, and insulate city officials from accountability through mechanisms such as biased stakeholder selection, predetermined meeting outcomes, and manipulated online surveys.



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Using Rancho Cucamonga, California — specifically its [General Plan Update \(PlanRC\)](#) and [Healthy RC](#) programs — as a case study, we will examine how these practices distort governmental processes and favor preselected outcomes, often under the guise of community engagement.

### Rancho Cucamonga’s PlanRC and Healthy RC

Rancho Cucamonga’s General Plan Update, adopted on December 15, 2021, after [nearly two years](#) of planning, is lauded as a “comprehensive community-based plan to serve as a blueprint for the next 20 years.” However, the process reveals troubling patterns. The selection of stakeholders for interviews and advisory roles favored established organizations and leaders, potentially excluding grassroots voices or residents skeptical of rapid development. Online surveys and virtual workshops were vulnerable to manipulation due to their open-access nature and consultant-driven design. The Healthy RC program, integrated into the General Plan, similarly used grant-funded initiatives to promote policies [shaped by external funding priorities](#) rather than purely local needs.

### The Illusion of Local Control

Cities such as Rancho Cucamonga proudly champion “local control” as a cornerstone of governance, emphasizing that decisions reflect the will of residents. However, the influx of grant funding — often tied to [federal programs](#) or state mandates — introduces conditions that can override local priorities. Grants from agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or state programs [come with strings attached](#), requiring cities to align projects with specific goals, such as [diversity, equity, and inclusion \(DEI\)](#), [greenhouse-gas reduction](#), [multifamily housing](#), and “public health” initiatives. These conditions shift decision-making power away from local voters and elected officials to external entities, including grant administrators and consultants, who may not be accountable to the community.

In Rancho Cucamonga, the Healthy RC initiative, launched in 2008 to address rising obesity and health issues, exemplifies this dynamic. The program is partially funded by grants such as a \$5,000 Let’s Eat Healthy Community Grant from the Dairy Council of California. While the initiative appears community-driven, its reliance on grant funding risks tying it to [predefined objectives](#), which may not always align with the priorities of residents.



## Creating a Faux Constituency

One way grant-driven initiatives undermine local control is through the strategic selection of stakeholders who form a “faux constituency” to push agendas forward. In Rancho Cucamonga’s General Plan Update, stakeholder interviews were conducted with 18 carefully selected individuals, including industry leaders, community-based organizations, and elected officials. The city’s own documentation [notes](#) that these interviews provided a “snapshot of existing conditions, trends, and public sentiment.” However, the selection process for these stakeholders is opaque, and there is little evidence that it represented the broader community.

By prioritizing certain voices — often those aligned with city or grant objectives — officials can create a curated group that appears representative but is biased toward predetermined outcomes. For example, the Healthy RC program’s Campeones para la Comunidad (Champions for the Community) and Youth Leaders are highlighted as community champions, yet the programs’ structures [indicate](#) a controlled process that favors individuals likely to support city initiatives. This curated engagement gives the appearance of broad community support while sidelining dissenting voices, effectively diluting the influence of the broader electorate.

## Predetermined Outcomes

Public meetings and workshops, often mandated by grant conditions, are framed as opportunities for community input, but can serve as tools to guide participants toward preselected outcomes. Rancho Cucamonga’s PlanRC “[Forum on Our Future](#)” sessions, held in mid-2020, were designed to collect input, but [summaries](#) of these events suggest a focus on reinforcing city priorities, such as dense urban housing diversification and climate-change sustainability, which align with state mandates and grant requirements. Live polling and virtual presentations during these meetings often [frame questions](#) in ways that limit the scope of discussion, subtly steering participants toward outcomes favored by city staff and consultants.

For instance, the “[Dollars and Sense of City Development](#)” presentation at the January 6, 2021 City Council meeting emphasized fiscal sustainability and housing options, aligning with state housing laws and grant-funded goals. These meetings, while open to the public, often present polished narratives that downplay alternative perspectives, such as concerns about overdevelopment or displacement in low-income neighborhoods.

## The Role of Consultants and Plausible Deniability

Consultants play a pivotal role in insulating city councils and staff from accountability. Hired to facilitate meetings, analyze data, and develop plans, consultants act as intermediaries who can be blamed for controversial outcomes, providing officials with plausible deniability. In Rancho Cucamonga, the PlanRC process relied heavily on consultants to conduct stakeholder interviews, design online surveys, and draft the General Plan. These consultants, often funded by grants, are presented as neutral experts, but their work is shaped by the city’s objectives and the grants’ conditions. By outsourcing critical aspects of the planning process, city officials can deflect criticism, claiming that outcomes were driven by “expert” analysis or community input rather than their own directives.

Online surveys, a key component of PlanRC’s engagement strategy, further exemplify this issue. These surveys, accessible to anyone worldwide via platforms such as [Engage Rancho Cucamonga](#), lack mechanisms to verify that respondents are local residents. This global accessibility, while promoted as inclusive, risks distorting results by allowing non-residents — potentially including stakeholders with



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vested interests, such as developers or grant-funded organizations — to influence outcomes. The surveys themselves are often designed with leading questions or limited response options, skewing results toward city-preferred policies, such as increased housing density or specific health initiatives. This manipulation prioritizes external or elite interests over those of actual residents.

## **Go Along to Get Along**

Grant terms and conditions can foster a “go along to get along” attitude among elected city-council members by creating incentives and pressures that prioritize compliance with external agendas over local priorities, as illustrated in the context of Rancho Cucamonga’s Healthy RC and PlanRC initiatives. Healthy RC’s focus on grant-driven health metrics emphasizing reductions in childhood obesity and PlanRC’s emphasis on state-mandated urban-housing goals illustrate how council members are incentivized to align with external agendas. The fear of losing funding, coupled with consultant-led processes and biased stakeholder input, fosters a culture where compliance trumps independent scrutiny, [undermining local control](#) and encouraging a passive, conformist attitude to secure grants and maintain political favor.

## **The Cost of Grant Programs**

The reliance on grants and consultant-driven processes creates a system where local control is an illusion. By favoring select stakeholders, manipulating public engagement, and using consultants to insulate officials, cities such as Rancho Cucamonga can push agendas that benefit specific interests — such as developers or nonprofit grant-funded organizations — while sidelining residents. The open-access nature of online surveys and meetings, while marketed as inclusive, risks diluting local voices and allowing external actors to shape outcomes. This erodes trust, as residents may feel their votes and voices are secondary to predetermined plans.

To restore local control, cities must prioritize transparent voting over clandestine stakeholder selection and biased design surveys. Local officials must make decisions based on impartial facts and ensure that public meetings allow for genuine debate rather than scripted outcomes. Until this happens, grant-driven initiatives will continue to undermine residents’ input, favoring a system where plausible deniability and curated constituencies prevail over the will of the people.

*To learn about the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 and how to stop it, [click here](#).*

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