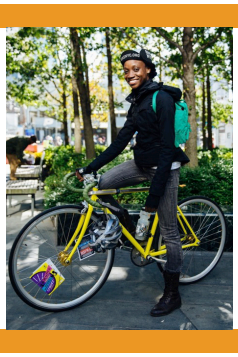
Strategies for Meaningful Community Engagement

fresc best practices from the field



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Why do community engagement?

The Problem

Most municipalities recognize the importance of community engagement and make good faith attempts to involve residents and stakeholders in planning processes. However time and again public officials are frustrated, finding that their efforts come up short even though they often make a good faith effort. Their tools for public engagement and protocols should produce useful results but no one shows up to meetings. Or they're able to engage large numbers of the usual suspects but can't seem to break into underserved populations no matter how hard they try.

The Solution Can Be Simple

Community engagement does not need to be complicated but it must address the legacy challenges in a community. Many towns struggle to engage low-income residents or residents of color and fail to benefit from the expertise, insight or perspective from these populations. By adhering to the five strategic princliples first outlined by

We suggest four simple steps to a more genuine process:

1. Ask yourself who's missing?
2. Make a targeted outreach plan
3. Go where people are
4. Make the process accessible AND meaningful

Ask yourself who's missing?

Make a targeted outreach plan

Go where people are

Make the process accessible AND meaningful

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Benefits of community engagement

A city project without community engagement or with ineffective engagement risks missing the mark. No matter how much sweat a city staff or small group of stakeholders puts into a project, that project will not succeed unless the right people have been engaged. This does not mean that every process must reach every impacted resident. However, if people are not engaged or the wrong people are asked then a city risks building a trail or park that won't be used because connectivity issues weren't addressed.

The benefits of a healthy engagement process are many:

1. Legitimacy and increased support for plans and projects. Governments enacting plans with the support of the community will have the buy in necessary to succeed. This will mean the difference between wasted resources and a thriving community.
2. Ownership of the project. The more the community feels respected and heard the more they will feel pride in their community and government.
3. Creating new resources that the community will actually use will lead to a more vibrant environment.
4. Healing of historic racial and economic disparities. Healing community rifts is not a simple process and cannot be achieved through a few planning processes. However, when governments operate transparent, honest community engagement they offer opportunities for healing. When governments do not shy away from difficult topics they build legitimacy for themselves and become partners in healing historic disparities.
5. Better projects. No matter how knowledgeable a city staff is they can't be aware of all the community concerns and voices without seeking that input. Community members know their neighborhoods best and will be able to offer valuable insights.
6. Reduction in long term costs. Savings will be captured if a process can avoid litigation costs down the road. Furthermore, an underutilized project might face more improvement costs in the shorter term. [1]

[1]Modified from PolicyLink: The Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities: http://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/COMMUNITYENGAGEMENTGUIDE_LY_FINAL%20%281%29.pdf[1]

The Basics

Q: When should community issues be addressed?

>>As early in the process as possible.

Q: What should the process look like?

>>As opened ended questions as possible to solicit everything that stakeholders like or do not like about the project/site.

Q: When and where should meetings take place?

>>During non-work hours for your target population at sites that are accessible to those who work and accessible to those who speak languages other than English.

Q: How should processes be handled?

>>With transparency and accountability.

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Strategies for Engagement

Ask yourself who's missing?

Though many city ordinances only require representatives of formal neighborhood associations to be included, that is problematic as many formal associations are disproportionally representative of home-owners and may not include more vulnerable populations. Community groups serving other populations should be included in process.

Use caution when appointing representatives too early in the process unless there's a way for newer individuals to be involved later.

Strategies for conducting community engagement in fragmented & disempowered communities:

- Seek out relationships with leaders from non-represented communities. Work with them to identify the barriers to engagement and ways to bridge the divide into their community.
- Engage faith-based organizations in the community to help bring hard-to-reach residents on board—helping to reach beyond the "usual" voices. Use caution for processes that appoint a group of representatives early in the process and then do not include newer individuals as equal stakeholders/ voices later down the line.
- Create many entry points for engagement and recognize the relative levels of power, voice, impact and opportunity for knowledge-sharing and relationship-building that they afford, including appointment to decision-making boards and commissions, advisory groups, task forces, focus groups and town hall meetings.
- Stay the course – listening to the community's concerns is central to developing and building trust.

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Non-traditional stakeholders can include:

- Disability organizations
- Labor unions and community workforce providers
- Local schools or children's centers
- Faith leaders
- Local community groups with a focus on specific racial or ethnic groups

Is thorough engagement always necessary?

No! Public meetings and input processes can be expensive to administer and can add unnecessary delay to a project. FRESC recommends a two-tiered approach involving a straightforward regulatory tier (tier one) where certain minimum standards apply to all land use decisions, and a more flexible tier (tier two) that uses key criteria to determine the level of public involvement called for. The rationale behind the tier system is that small decisions impact a smaller number of individuals and have a smaller impact on the overall sustainability of a community. To determine tier, consider both actual risk to populations as well as perceptions and levels of concern.

Tier one: run-of the mill decisions (rezoning a single lot, allowing a home business, single building height or set-back variances etc.)

Acceptable tier one actions:

- notice to impacted land-owners
- posting on the property
- posting online
- short comment period for concerned individuals to be heard

Tier two: a larger group of individuals will be impacted or larger land use changes will result.

Tier two considerations:

- low-income residents are at risk of direct or indirect displacement
- real or perceived environmental contamination
- public funds or subsidies will be involved
- projects or decisions exceeding a certain scope or size
- any vision plan intended to guide future land use decisions
- there are stakeholders who could be negatively impacted

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Make a targeted outreach plan

Although it might be tempting to take shortcuts or replicate an old process, a good deal of work needs to be done on the front end to ensure an equitable and successful community engagement process. Special attention must be paid to target audience, the best tools to reach residents, objectives and resources.

Strategies for proactive and targeted engagement:

- Work through existing networks of community-based organizations that serve and organize in diverse cultural communities to identify the leaders to work with.
- Develop awareness of the racial and economic disparities in your city or region and why those disparities exist (informed by experienced community leaders and organizations).
- Attend community meetings and cultural events as a participant. Listen to what issues they discuss and how they talk about them. Enter with a sense of humility and awareness of potential power dynamics due to race, ethnic, citizenship, class, or gender differences.
- Host a "meet and greet" with community organizations and advocacy

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groups to build connections across sectors and develop partnerships. Get to know many groups: avoid working with citizens' groups that aren't actually representative of the community the program is designed for; and don't rely solely on the easily identifiable groups that although may be doing good work, are not the only advocates in the area.

- Build incentives for engagement for each strategy that reduce barriers to participate. Many residents in low-income communities and communities of color are from working families with busy schedules and childcare constraints. Meetings should be held in evenings and on weekends; and, whenever possible, provide childcare, meals, and transit passes.
- Translate materials and provide interpretation at community meetings. When working with non-native English speakers. These are critical elements to a successful engagement strategy that will both increase participation and help these communities feel more welcome into the planning process. Additionally, work with local leaders to identify trusted facilitators with experience working in the community.

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Go where people are

A lot of municipalities already set up tables or canvass at concerts, festivals and other community events. You know that outreach at a school, church or library can yield much more interaction with community than a bulk mailing. The trick with this strategy is to invest thoroughly in your capacity for this outreach and commit to reaching people this way. Face to face interactions will yield the most genuine input and will strengthen your project.

It can be challenging to get robust turnout numbers at an input session. Consider setting up tables or canvassing at events where the community is already gathered. Concerts, festivals and other outdoor events can be the perfect place to meet folks where they're at. Libraries, churches and schools are also wonderful resources.

It is vital to translate documents and have translation at meetings in communities with populations of non-English speakers. Think about how to reach non-native speakers beforehand, including use of radio and community newspapers.

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Strategies to prioritize community knowledge and concerns:

- Hold listening sessions or study circles to elevate community concerns.
- Incorporate storytelling activities into the process to bring liveliness to the conversation.
- Work with community leaders to facilitate walking or bus tours with elected officials and stakeholders to highlight assets, opportunities, and challenges in low-income communities and communities of color to develop rapport and sense of shared concerns between decision-makers and local communities.
- Using diverse communication techniques such as social media, pictures, video, painting and other types of art can help people who absorb information visually become more involved with the process.
- House the process within politically neutral sites and make use of community events such as local festivals.
- Work with community organizations or community/university partnerships to conduct participatory, action-oriented research to guide the process.
- Create an inventory of past and current community initiatives.
- Include equity representation on technical advisory committees.

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Make the process accessible AND meaningful

Facilitation should be conducted by an independent entity when vulnerable communities are involved. The facilitator should understand the local community, should not be a developer or a developer's consultant. Facilitation should focus on socio-economic impacts of land use decisions, not just physical elements of sustainability.

Many community members might be able to participate if childcare or refreshments are provided and thought has been given to the best time for a meeting (for example, if hundreds of your residents work in an industry with shifts starting at 3pm, a 5pm meeting will not reach that population).

Do

- Work with a skilled facilitator
- Underscore shared, deep values
- Acknowledge that individualism is important, but that the healthiest individual is nurtured by a community invested in everyone's success.
- Propose policies that are universal and targeted.
- Be aware that word choice matters.
- Acknowledge cultural assets and contributions.
- Be prepared for emotionally charged sentiments from residents

Don't

- Present disparities only and then leave them there – give context
- Separate out people in need from "everybody else"
- Glide over real fears, shared suffering, or the fact that people are often internally conflicted.
- Feel the need to solve all problems or resolve all conflicts, but do hold the space to legitimize and recognize concern or conflict.
- Dismiss the importance of individual efforts.

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Strategies for building in decision-making opportunities:

- Structure your consortium to include substantive representation of people of color or organizations that represent low-income communities in various decision-making capacities (consortia leadership, committees, subcommittees, stakeholder meetings). It is not enough to have one or two representatives; have enough people represented that their voices will not be marginalized during difficult conversations.
- Communicate all key decision points in planning process: committee membership opportunities, grant deadlines, plan draft dates, hearings and votes by legislative bodies, zoning changes, etc.
- Fund equity-focused organizations to train participating residents from low-income communities and communities of color in the content and skills they will need to exercise informed leadership.
- Establish a social equity caucus or working group with decision-making authority and oversight over key areas of the project, including the community engagement strategy and the fair housing and equity assessment. Provide opportunities in other working groups and decision-making bodies for substantive equity caucus representation. Ensure that equity caucus members have opportunities to shape agendas, collect information, and direct content.
- Set aside resources to be shaped and decided on by community members. This could include grants for community engagement, hiring of consultants, selection of demonstration projects, land acquisition funds, or participatory budgeting.
- Articulate expectations for equity inclusion and partnership with other stakeholders in the consortium. Work to proactively identify barriers to meeting those expectations, and dedicate resources to address those needs.
- Proactively cultivate new community leaders. Activities targeted at youth engagement can be very successful in identifying promising leaders, engaging their parents, and increasing participation in communities of color.