

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is often seen as another box to check as part of the planning process. However, meaningfully engaging community members can result in greater support for a project, more competitive grant applications, greater chance of securing funding, and improved quality of life for residents through implementation of projects that accurately address their needs and priorities.

Effective and meaningful engagement should aim to increase community influence on decision-making throughout all stages of a planning process, including visioning and goal-setting, assessment, design, implementation, and evaluation. The International Association for Public Participation created a spectrum of public participation that identifies the level of power community members have through planning processes, from the least amount of power (where community members are not involved in the process and are only informed by decision-makers) to the most amount of power (where community members are empowered to make final decisions). Planners and decision-makers should aim to move as far along the spectrum towards empowerment as possible in order to improve health equity through the built environment.

WALKSacramento has identified seven overarching principles for meaningful community engagement based on best practices from across the nation and from proven effective strategies in the Sacramento Region. Three case studies further exemplify how these principles can be embedded into planning processes and how meaningful engagement can lead to more successful and impactful outcomes.

International Association for Public Participation Spectrum of Public Participation

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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PRINCIPLES FOR MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

PARTNERSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Core Tenants	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community members and stakeholders are seen as valuable partners throughout the planning process and help inform decision-making and drive outcomes.• Communities are directly involved in identifying challenges and co-creating solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop long-term, collaborative working relationships between local government agencies, community partners, and other stakeholders that extend beyond the scope of a specific project.• Fund community partners to engage with the communities they work with.• Foster community champions and provide support as needed for them to take the lead on projects in their communities.

INCLUSIVITY AND EQUITY

Core Tenants	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participants throughout the process reflect the diversity of relevant communities and stakeholders who should be involved.• Historically underrepresented or excluded groups are authentically engaged and help set priorities, inform decision-making, and guide culturally sensitive and relevant outcomes.• The process respects the range of values and knowledge each participant brings to the table.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work with trusted community partners such as neighborhood associations, local community services organizations, disability advocacy groups, cultural groups, school groups, and family-oriented organizations.• Be an active listener and respect the lived experiences of community members. Focus on community assets, not only challenges and issues. Understand the community's context and history.

EARLY AND ONGOING INVOLVEMENT

Core Tenants	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community members and stakeholders are involved early and at all stages of the process.• Planning efforts are influenced by and responsive to the needs and priorities of communities, rather than the outcome of government-sponsored initiatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work with community members and stakeholders to define the project vision and goals early in the process. Continue engagement throughout subsequent parts of the process.• Share frequent project updates with the public and with community members and stakeholders who have been engaged at various stages.• Provide opportunities and avenues outside of specific projects for sharing and receiving information from the public on an ongoing basis.

RELEVANCE AND RESPONSIVENESS

Core Tenants	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The planning process is responsive to the needs of participants and encourages full, authentic, effective, and equitable participation.• The process incorporates different methods of engagement in order to encourage involvement from different types of groups and stakeholders.• Engagement is continually evaluated for effectiveness during the process and at the end of the project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop and implement an outreach strategy that incorporates a wide variety of communication methods, including online and printed communications. Work with partner organizations to invite participation from a wide range of community members.• Be flexible and adapt to changing needs and issues throughout the process.

ACCESSIBILITY

Core Tenants	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All members of the public, regardless of age, race, income, physical and mental ability, or other characteristics, are able to fully and effectively participate in the planning process.• The process is inviting and easy for all members of the public to engage with.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify potential barriers to participation and strategies to remove or mitigate these barriers. Barriers may include the time and location of meetings, lack of access to transportation, language, etc. Accommodations such as food, childcare, and translation can help address some of these barriers.• Go to the community, don't ask for the community to come to you. Hold public meetings or workshops in partnership with trusted community partners or in coordination with existing community events.

AUTHENTICITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Core Tenants	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The process is accessible, honest, and understandable.• The process is a conduit for community members and stakeholders to identify priorities and guide outcomes, rather than a platform to persuade the public to adopt a decision that has already been made.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be clear about how decisions will be made and how the ideas and feedback received through the engagement process will be incorporated into outcomes.• Limit jargon and ensure that communication materials are simple and clear.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Core Tenants	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Local government is held accountable for ensuring meaningful and effective public engagement occurs throughout planning processes.• Clear outcomes are defined and pursued in order to implement solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dedicate funding for public engagement efforts as part of planning projects. Public engagement budgets should consider including stipends for community partners to conduct outreach, translation services for materials and events, venue, childcare, and food costs for workshops, and any additional services or materials that would effectively engage relevant communities and stakeholders.• Allocate funds or seek funding opportunities to implement plans after an authentic and effective planning process so that actual results are realized.



CASE STUDY: Family and Community Engagement for Traffic Safety in South Oak Park

BACKGROUND

Oak Ridge Elementary is located within South Oak Park at the border between the City of Sacramento and the unincorporated County, in a disadvantaged community that is disproportionately vulnerable to and impacted by poor health outcomes. Additionally, Oak Ridge Elementary is one of Sacramento City Unified School District's priority schools for a campaign to reduce chronic absence. Transportation is among the top three barriers resulting in chronic absence, making safe active transportation critical for health equity and access to opportunity.

Over the course of the 2018-19 school year, WALKSacramento worked with Oak Ridge Elementary to engage the school community around traffic safety as part of a yearlong Safe Routes to School program. One of the goals of the program was to identify opportunities for infrastructure improvements around the school that would create a safer walking and biking environment for students.

PROCESS


WALKSacramento conducted a walk audit in coordination with the school during the fall of 2018. The purpose of the walk audit was to understand barriers for walking and biking to school and to identify community-supported recommendations for improvements. The walk audit was held in the morning after school started in order to make it easier for parents to attend after dropping off their students. The school also invited students in the leadership program to participate and share their experiences and challenges with walking to school. In total, approximately 40 students, parents, school staff, and community partners attended. Because the school has a high Spanish-speaking population, the walk audit was held in both English and Spanish and materials were provided in both languages.

Following up from the initial walk audit, WALKSacramento participated in the school's monthly family meetings to gather feedback on recommendations that resulted from the walk audit and to support families' goals for speed hump advocacy, safer pick-up and drop-off conditions, and student walking groups.

OUTCOMES

As a result of in-depth community engagement, WALKSacramento was able to develop a series of infrastructure recommendations that reflected community priorities. Based on this work, the City met with WALKSacramento and school staff to discuss how to incorporate these community-supported recommendations into the City's Vision Zero School Safety Study.

Additionally, the walk audit helped spur a number of family-led initiatives to address safety concerns at the school. Walk audit participants identified the crosswalk at the front of the school and the back entrance as primary safety concerns, but there was not enough school staff capacity to consistently monitor these locations. As a result, parents began volunteering for crossing guard duty and to monitor the back entrance.



CASE STUDY: Supporting Complete Streets Through Interactive Events in Southern California

Source: SCAG

BACKGROUND

The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) initiated a regional active transportation education and encouragement campaign called Go Human, with the goals of reducing traffic collisions in Southern California and encouraging people to walk and bike more. As part of the campaign, SCAG worked with local jurisdictions to implement open street events and safety demonstration projects that would raise awareness of active transportation safety and provide an opportunity to test complete streets strategies. Phase One included eight projects in six jurisdictions, and Phase Two included nine projects in nine jurisdictions.


PROCESS

With funding dedicated for open streets and traffic safety demonstrations through the Go Human campaign, SCAG was able to work with jurisdictions to implement projects that were relevant to local contexts. The project team formed Community Advisory Committees for each event, which were comprised of a diverse set of local stakeholders including city staff, municipal agencies, elected official offices, community based organizations, businesses, and neighborhood groups. The Community Advisory Committees helped to identify and engage partners and funders and provide expertise to inform design, messaging, outreach, and implementation.

The local expertise of the Community Advisory Committee members led to the development of events that were tailored to communities and therefore resulted in high participation. In some cases, events were also planned in conjunction with existing events such as CicLAvia or the Santa Ana Cinco de Mayo Festival. In spite of differences in implementation, each event involved interactive elements to encourage community participation, including music, games, Go Human “Challenge” stations, guest speakers, and brightly colored street furniture. Survey responses were encouraged by providing respondents with giveaway items such as T-shirts or by entering respondents into a raffle for a larger prize such as a bike.

OUTCOMES

Overall, the Go Human events were effective planning tools for local jurisdictions to receive community feedback and garner public support for complete streets improvements. Due to the interactive nature of the events, there was generally high participation from the community, particularly among groups who are not typically represented at traditional public meetings such as families, youth, and people of color. Participants indicated strong support for making temporary improvements permanent, such as separated bike lanes, crosswalk improvements, parklets, and other safety and placemaking elements. As a result of the events, local jurisdictions were able to pilot infrastructure treatments, build community support, and ultimately streamline implementation of planning and infrastructure projects.



CASE STUDY: Improving Park Access Through Community-Led Efforts in Richmond

Source: Pogo Park

BACKGROUND

Pogo Park is a community-based nonprofit organization that is rooted in the Iron Triangle neighborhood of Richmond, California. The Iron Triangle is bordered by three railroad tracks and located near Richmond's heavy industrial areas, including the Chevron Refinery, BNSF Railway, Richmond Parkway, and Port of Richmond. The community is disproportionately burdened by environmental pollution, poverty, unemployment, limited access to green space and healthy food, and other factors that have led to poor health outcomes among children and adults in the neighborhood. In order to improve health and quality of life for Iron Triangle residents, Pogo Park works to transform parks and streets into safe, attractive spaces and to empower community members through workforce development. To date, Pogo Park has transformed two park sites and completed traffic calming improvements through a "play streets" initiative called Yellow Brick Road.

PROCESS

Community empowerment is integral to Pogo Park's efforts. Pogo Park's first project to reimagine Elm Playlot, a half-acre pocket park in the Iron Triangle neighborhood, focused on hiring and training community residents to lead the planning, design, and construction efforts. After working with the community first, Pogo Park then partnered with the City of Richmond and a design consultant to complete construction. A pop-up park at the Elm Playlot site provided residents with a tangible preview of what the park would look like once complete. After the park was completed, Pogo Park staffed the park with members of the Community Resident Team in order to provide programs and services to the community.

The Yellow Brick Road project was developed using a similar approach as Elm Playlot. Youth in the community came up with the idea of a safe and beautiful walking and biking path that would connect to multiple community destinations, make the neighborhood safer for children and families, and provide environmental benefits through urban greening. Temporary traffic circle installations provided an opportunity to test the impacts and gauge success before final implementation. Community members designed the first traffic circle at Elm Playlot and were involved in its construction.

OUTCOMES

By focusing on community empowerment and grassroots engagement, Pogo Park has been able to successfully deliver projects that are meaningful to the community. Previous revitalization projects in the Iron Triangle have often failed due to lack of community ownership. By contrast, hiring community residents to lead their own planning efforts has been more effective to ensure that projects meet the needs of the community in the right ways, and therefore sustains success in the long-term. Since its opening, park usage has increased and the neighborhood has seen a reduction of violent crime and vandalism in the vicinity. As a result of in-depth community engagement, Pogo Park has helped secure grant funding as well as private investment for new parks and active transportation infrastructure improvements in the Iron Triangle.