



Community Engagement Plans

Community engagement plans act as a strategic road map for bringing key stakeholders and underrepresented groups into the planning process. They can be used to gather input from community members and provide an opportunity to educate the public on key housing issues.

Engagement plans may contain a background assessment of the issue at hand, why the issue is important, public opinions on the issue, and strategies to address potential barriers and community needs. Plan development is a great time to identify the level of engagement to be used and what resources will be needed.

WHAT ISSUES DO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLANS AND STRATEGIES ADDRESS?

People are often sensitive to the possibility of neighborhood change. While you may not see affordable housing opportunities as a threat to the character of a neighborhood or city, residents may be uncomfortable or resistant for a variety of reasons. Community engagement allows local jurisdictions to better understand the needs of their communities and provides an opportunity to involve the public in a decision-making process.

Outreach opportunities allow community members to share their needs and priorities, learn about proposed actions, and participate in shaping development. Frequently, however, those who participate in the traditional planning process are not representative of the entire community. Plan development presents jurisdictions with an opportunity to bring disenfranchised or underrepresented voices into the conversation. Targeted engagement efforts can be used to reach out to specific groups that are not usually present in the decision-making process and provide them with opportunities and tools to engage.

By participating in community engagement, planners can incorporate the real-life experiences of residents into policy; provide



TOOL PROFILE

Objectives

[Housing in Centers and Near Transit](#)

[Housing Options in Expensive Markets](#)

[Missing Middle Density](#)

[Mitigate Residential Displacement](#)

[Build Community Support](#)

[Addressing Racial Inequities](#)

Type of Tool

Education and Outreach

Project Type

Single family

Multifamily

Ownership

Rental

Affordability Level

Market-rate incentives and tools

Most effective for units <80% AMI



more information on controversial issues; collaboratively plan with the public; and strengthen existing relationships, develop new relationships, or repair old relationships with communities.

WHERE ARE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLANS AND STRATEGIES MOST APPLICABLE?

Depending on the issue and scope of interest, engagement can be geared towards an entire city, residents within a given zone, a single neighborhood, or a population group. Engagement plans are applicable to all types of projects, focus areas, and affordability levels, and may be tailored to meet unique needs. The goal is to increase understanding and awareness of an issue by both community members and local jurisdictions, and to use that input to ensure policies are rooted in the values, ideas, and lived experiences of the communities they impact. While the means for doing this may vary by project, the intent and need for community engagement can apply to all dimensions of housing production.

Community engagement plans and strategies may be used by jurisdictions interested in engaging the public for a variety of reasons:

- Soliciting input on a proposed change in policy or an ordinance
- Creating a vision for a neighborhood or entire town
- Receiving feedback on a proposed development
- Connecting community members interested in working on a particular issue
- Understanding the sentiment behind opposition to a policy or development
- Educating the public on an unfamiliar issue
- Providing facts and information about a contested or controversial issue

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT USING OR DEVELOPING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLANS?

Scope and Intent

Community outreach begins with identifying the scope of the engagement. What kind of issues do you want to address? Maybe your city is proposing more compact housing developments or new affordable homes are slated to be developed in a neighborhood? Perhaps there is tension over an existing development or apathy or lack of awareness about housing issues in general? Engagement plans can use different methods to address these issues.

Scoping also includes identifying the variety of audiences and key partners to involve in the engagement. Knowing who they are and the role of each group is important for designing the messages and components that make up a community engagement plan. Establishing the intended outcome is important for setting expectations and accountability for both the project team and community. An engagement plan that aims to inform the community looks different from one aiming for shared decision-making.



Create Equitable Engagement Opportunities

After outlining the scope, audience, and intent of the engagement, it is important to determine the resources that are needed for conducting effective engagement that is representative of the community. Community members may be unwilling to participate in the engagement process based on previous experiences working with government agencies or are unable due to the time commitment. Having a better understanding of what dynamics exist in your community is necessary for representative engagement. Resources such as transportation support, childcare, food, accessible meeting locations and times, and compensation are important to consider. The meeting format and facilitation can play a role in encouraging new community voices. Consider using alternative meeting formats, like small focus groups or workshops, and providing clear and comprehensible materials, to facilitate richer discussion.

Gauge Initial Attitudes

Your community engagement plan should start with an initial engagement effort to gain a sense of the understanding and opinions held by the public, elected officials, and interest groups. Identifying the barriers to community acceptance should stem from community input as well as your own research and observations. Public meetings, charettes, focus groups, surveys and listening booths at community events are engagement strategies that could capture this kind of information. Take note of who participated in the initial engagement. Passive engagement techniques may not garner enough information from marginalized or unorganized groups. You may need to contact and seek the input of these groups by attending their meetings or events. The information you gather in this phase will help inform the messages and activities you prepare to implement the plan.

Content and Developing the Plan

The general direction of engagement should become apparent based on the initial input you received. The next steps are to develop the messages of the plan and means for delivering them. There may be common misconceptions about the negative effects of affordable or new types of housing. People might be unaware that the median home price or rent is unattainable to the labor base in your city. On the other hand, the levels of awareness and engagement may be high, but the community could be divided around the issue(s) at hand. Coalition and capacity building strategies can help with this issue.

For housing issues that require ongoing public participation and involvement, consider the role of the participating public. What is the purpose of their involvement? Should your engagement be consultative, gathering public opinion, but ultimately making staff-level decisions, or should you adopt a collaborative approach, actively partnering with participants for future decisions or education efforts? Both can be chosen, as different approaches are likely to suit different elements of your engagement efforts. For example, when designing a campaign to educate the public on the need for workforce housing, you could consultatively survey for level of knowledge on the subject, and, later on, try to raise awareness in collaboration with stakeholders at organizational meetings or with neighbors. Including a schedule or timeline of planning decisions and activities relating to the housing issues will relate engagement and input to specific tasks, as well as communicate the planning process to participants.



Regardless of the orientation of the engagement, it is essential to link the input received with the developed work plan and decision-making surrounding the issue. Failure to do so can result in community distrust and skepticism towards future efforts. The messages developed as a part of the plan should incorporate and address the concerns of the specific groups that you are seeking to reach. Messages are rarely one-size-fits-all. The input you received will help you understand how to frame the issues in terms that reflect the concerns and desires of community members.

This process of reaching out to stakeholders, providing a variety of public participation opportunities, and linking the input to the decision-making process can be accomplished through a variety of engagement strategies. Many can be modified to match the level of concern towards housing issues and the level of effort of the housing plan, program, regulations or project.

The steps in creating a community engagement plan are more detailed than described in this overview. Visit the links below for guidance and specific steps for creating an engagement plan or selecting strategies, as well as other community education and engagement tools (see: [strategies to address NIMBY](#)), to build your repertoire of engagement strategies.

Public engagement is a time-intensive activity. You may not see results immediately. The goal is to create a foundation for dialogue and dissolve barriers that prevent the construction or addition of affordable and diverse housing in your community. These tasks may not be as visible or exciting as an on-the ground development, but are key to community acceptance.

MODEL POLICIES, MODEL REGULATIONS, OTHER INFORMATION

King County: [Community Engagement Guide](#) (2011)

Developments Magazine: [Creating a Community Outreach Plan](#) (2006)

Center for Land Use Education: [Crafting an Effective Plan for Public Participation](#) (2004)

Local Housing Solutions: [Engaging the community in the development of a local housing strategy](#) (2020)

MRSC: [Guidance and Resources for Public Participation](#) (2020)

Futurewise: [Community Engagement Toolkit, Guidance and Resources for Engaging Community in Planning and Policy Development](#) (2014)

