

Community Engagement Tools



Background

Definition

Community engagement is an integral component of public planning processes. Effective engagement allows community members to voice their views and contribute to policy decisions that affect their communities. Well-designed engagement processes are accessible and meaningful to community members with diverse backgrounds and knowledge on the issues at hand, and are responsive to community input and transparent in decision-making.

In Washington State, there are many statutes that establish minimum standards for community engagement in planning—including the [Growth Management Act](#), [State Environmental Policy Act](#), [Open Meetings Act](#), and [Public Records Act](#). Beyond these baseline requirements, however, jurisdictions and public agencies view community engagement as an essential element of a wide range of planning activities and a means to produce the community buy-in that is critical to plan implementation. For example, the Puget Sound Regional Council’s [Public Participation Plan](#) (2013) contains guiding principles that articulate why meaningful public involvement yields better policy decisions and implementation.

Community engagement is not a single tool, but is rather a process that may take place at various levels and employ different approaches at multiple points throughout a planning process. The King County [Community Engagement Guide](#) (2011) provides a continuum for community engagement (see figure on following page). On one end of the continuum, the public agency engages the community primarily through one-directional “top-down” mechanisms to share information. On the other end, it is the community that directs the process, providing information and direction to the public agency. All approaches along this continuum are valid and may be effective, depending on the issue at hand, previous engagement activities, and how far along planning has progressed.

The Growing Transit Communities Strategy identified a toolbox of equitable community engagement strategies that include:

- *Multilingual outreach and engagement*
- *Outreach through existing community groups and organizations*
- *Direct person-to-person outreach where people live and do business*
- *Support for meeting participation, such as childcare, refreshments, and convenient scheduling and locations*
- *Clarity of communications on scope and focus of engagement, expectations and process*
- *Visualization tools and other multi-media approaches*
- *Innovative models for effective engagement and long-term relationship building, such as trusted advocate and public outreach liaisons*
- *Building capacity and cultural competency within organizations and public agencies, such as through training and recruitment, in order to engage effectively with diverse constituencies*



Community Engagement Continuum (adapted from King County Community Engagement Guide, 2011)

Health, equity and sustainability considerations

Effective community engagement must address key equity considerations and may lead to positive health and sustainability outcomes. The King County Community Engagement Guide states that “[community engagement processes] should consider the diversity of our communities, including culture and ethnicity, and seek to create an inclusive and accessible process. Effective engagement removes barriers for communities that may have previously prevented residents from successfully working with [local] government.”

The Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department’s [guidelines for public participation](#) (2012) links community engagement to health outcomes, stating “Public health research shows that citizens who are more civically engaged and those who feel a sense of control over the decisions that impact their lives experience better health outcomes. Successful stakeholder participation can lead to a more informed, empowered and continuously engaged base.” In short, equitable engagement leads to more equitable decisions and better health and equity outcomes in communities.

The Growing Transit Communities Partnership, a three-year effort supported by a Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, created the Regional Equity Network in part to recommend strategies to empower communities and build local capacity to actively participate in planning and policy making processes. The Regional Equity Network’s definition of social equity includes a statement that “those affected by poverty, communities of color, and historically marginalized communities have leadership and influence in decision making processes, planning, and policy-making.” In 2012, the Regional Equity Network developed principles for equitable development that included:

***Practice meaningful community engagement.** Require local community participation and leadership in decision-making to reflect a diversity of voices, including targeted strategies to engage historically marginalized communities. Build cultural competence and responsiveness among all stakeholders, and structure planning processes to be clear, accessible and engaging.*

A key equity challenge to meaningful community engagement is the limited capacity in time and resources of many community members and community-based organizations to participate in public planning processes. Local governments and non-governmental organizations can adopt proactive strategies to build

community capacity for engagement, including investments in training, leadership development, and community organizing that increases the knowledge base, resources and competencies of individuals or groups to participate effectively in public planning and decision-making. The Regional Equity Network administered a three-year Equity Grant Program, highlighted below, to develop innovative community engagement and capacity building mechanisms.

Program and Policy Examples

Program examples

Growing Transit Communities (GTC) Equity Grant Program The GTC Equity Grant Program was based on the belief that effective community engagement and local leadership in planning and decision-making are essential to achieving equitable transit communities. Through investments of over \$450,000 in small capacity-building grants to community-based organizations, the grant program provided resources to organize and increase participation of underrepresented communities to shape the future of transit station areas and surrounding neighborhoods. The program, funded through the Growing Transit Communities Partnership, awarded 37 grants, ranging from \$5,000-\$15,000, to 29 organizations. The grant investments leveraged an additional \$574,500 in community resources.

One of the grant recipients was the [Community Network Council](#) (CNC), a group of community organizations and volunteers working cooperatively to connect youth with resources that will help them become successful. CNC focused on community outreach and capacity building in the Midway area along the south corridor. CNC developed surveys for resident and business outreach and identified Data Collectors from the neighborhood to administer the surveys. Before the Data Collectors began their door-to-door outreach, they received information about the upcoming light rail development so they were able to relay information to survey participants. CNC also provided postcards with a link to an online version of the survey, information about the potential light rail development, and a “Save the Date” for CNC’s community forum in September. Data Collectors passed out 400 of these postcards.

CNC organized a Community Transportation Forum to report back survey results and raise awareness about transportation issues in the area. Sound Transit gave a presentation on the upcoming planning process. HomeSight (a peer grantee and member of the Equity Steering Committee) shared lessons learned from their experience in South Seattle, and Forterra provided an overview of GTC strategies and led some small group activities. The result of the forum was an increased awareness for participants of the light rail extension and beginning engagement in conversations about TOD and what this might mean for their communities. In addition to outreach conducted as part of the survey, CNC used social media, and passed out flyers at community events, local businesses, community colleges, and bus stops. CNC also reached out to the Neighborhood Council in Des Moines, schools, and local service providers.

Following up from the forum, CNC produced a [newsletter](#) with information about the Federal Way Transit Extension Project and ways to be involved in the planning process. CNC also published information in the Kent Reporter and conducted in-person outreach at various events. They organized a leadership training for emerging community leaders, to better equip them to engage in TOD and planning discussions. CNC also participated in the Equity Summit.

Key summaries and findings from the grant program are included in an [Equity Grant Program Final Report](#) (January 2014). The report highlights six key lessons, summarized below:

- *Invest resources.* Outreach to and engagement with low-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant and refugee communities is time-intensive, people-focused work.
- *Build relationships.* Building relationships is a worthwhile investment and a fundamental component for equitable community engagement.
- *Make planning relevant.* Community members are experts in their experiences, but cannot lend their expertise to issues that are not relevant to them.
- *Increase cultural competency between organizations.* Policy advocacy organizations and cultural advocacy organizations may be more effective by working together.
- *Invest in community organizing and community capacity.* Community organizing and building community capacity are critical for communities to more fully engage in local planning.
- *Tailor communication methods.* Planners should experiment with communication tools and graphics that effectively communicate complex topics and decision making processes to diverse audiences.

The Final Report also contains numerous recommendations for public agencies and community-based organizations to improve community engagement by the agencies and organizations doing the outreach and increase capacity for engagement among the diverse communities in the region.

King County Community Engagement Guide

King County’s Community Engagement Guide builds on the county’s Strategic Plan and Equity & Social Justice Ordinance to promote tools, examples, and resources to assist county departments in designing effective and equitable community engagement strategies. The Guide asserts that “community engagement is a two-way exchange of information, ideas and resources,” and that “engagement activities include a range of approaches from informing to sharing leadership to resident-led efforts, depending on the degree of community and county involvement, decision-making and control.”

The Guide is intended to complement a Community Engagement Worksheet that county personnel complete at the beginning of each planning process. Using the Community Engagement Continuum (generalized in the figure on page 2), the worksheet helps county staff identify appropriate activities to engage different audiences. Depending on the level of engagement, activities may range from more “top-down” information-sharing, such as media releases or program brochures, to more interactive and integrated dialogues, such as through community advisory boards and community-hosted forums.

The guide acknowledges that community engagement “work is challenging and complex and [that staff] might make mistakes. The rewards of successful public engagement, however, are great, and lead to better results and work products.”

Implementation

Considerations for local implementation

The [Growing Transit Communities Strategy](#) (GTC Strategy) (2013) includes a toolkit of 24 key strategies to promote equitable transit communities in the central Puget Sound region, including strategies related to community engagement and capacity building. The full GTC Strategy document recommends detailed

actions that different partners across the region may take to make progress toward these goals, including the following recommendations for local governments:

- **Community Engagement:** Continue to develop and apply equitable community engagement strategies as part of local comprehensive and station area planning and other decision-making affecting transit communities.
- **Capacity Building:** Support community-based organizations through actions such as: convening community organizations, providing information about plans and projects in station areas, and offering staff support, meeting facilities, or funding for community organizations.

When developing community engagement strategies for public planning processes, local governments should consider the following:

- Effective community engagement requires cost in time and resources, but yields more successful plans.
- Traditionally underrepresented populations may require extra effort and innovative strategies for engagement.
- Partnerships with community-based organizations can increase depth and reach of engagement. Partnerships may benefit from capacity building and support to community-based organizations.
- Best practices—such as the Equity Grant Program—offer models of innovative strategies and lessons learned that can be applied to other planning processes.
- Transparent decision making and feedback to community members can build trust and improve future engagement.

The GTC Strategy acknowledges that, as with all public planning processes, “successful implementation...will depend on effective, responsive and ongoing engagement with as broad a range of community members and stakeholders as possible with opportunities to influence policies and actions early and often throughout the public decision making process.”

Resources

King County Equity and Social Justice [Tools and Resources](#) (2014)

King County Equity and Social Justice [Community Engagement Guide](#) (2011)

MRSC’s [Communications and Citizen Participation Techniques Resource Page](#) (2014)

MRSC Insights’ [Can you hear me now? Reaching out to engage increasingly diverse communities](#) (2014)

Puget Sound Regional Council’s [Public Involvement Resource Page](#) (2013)

Puget Sound Regional Council Growing Transit Communities’ [Social Equity Resource Page](#) (2014)

