The New Community Outreach Playbook

*How to Get Development Projects Approved Faster
By Building Community Trust & Support*

coUrbanize

Introduction

Most real estate developers dread the community outreach aspect of getting projects approved. Contentious meetings with angry neighbors and a long, tedious entitlement process put projects at risk - and cause a lot of stress for community members, municipal leaders and project teams alike.

However, much of the angst surrounding development today is caused by a twofold problem. Information and updates about planned developments are difficult to find (sometimes purposefully so) and to provide feedback or comments, community members typically had to attend public meetings. The result was a packed room filled with misinformed or under-informed people worried about what's going to happen to their neighborhood. That put developers immediately in a defensive position.

Most developers needed to pivot (often hesitantly) to digital engagement in 2020 to keep their projects moving. What we saw was something we've always known: digital engagement is more inclusive and productive, resulting in better development for the community and fewer headaches for your team.

We know the best way to handle community engagement – one that actually puts community feedback to work in a productive way, shaping project plans and ultimately playing a key role in getting projects approved faster. In this e-book, we'll share five tactics from the new community engagement playbook that leading developers like JBG SMITH and Boston Properties are using today.

1 Shift your mindset. Change your strategy.

Many developers fear public opinion – and actively avoid it. They've been burned in the past or have witnessed other projects in the community get derailed by neighborhood opposition. However, the resulting mentality of "the less attention, the better" puts a negative spotlight on the development team and project itself.

When the community – including public officials and influential members of approval boards – can't easily find out what's happening with a project, misinformation and negative opinions spread fast. The developer in question seems sneaky or sly, appearing to deceive and shut out neighbors in order to push plans through quickly, without engaging those directly impacted by said plans.

It's time for that mentality to change. Instead of avoiding community input, welcome it. Rather than going quiet or dark, be transparent and proactively communicate about where a project stands and what's shaping those plans. If this suggestion spurs fear and worries, remember that the familiar, angry faces at public meetings typically don't represent how most community members feel. Those people are often just the loudest.

"The notion that development is inherently bad, or that developers are inherently bad actors, seems to ignore that the communities residents want to protect from developers were once developed, too, and often by people who made money at it."

- Emily Badger, "*How 'Developer' Became Such a Dirty Word,*" New York Times

The New Attributes of Community Engagement

The traditional mentality	→	The new community engagement approach	→	How this manifests
Confrontational		Collaborative		Welcome, encourage and incorporate public feedback
Guarded		Transparent		Proactive communication with community from acquisition through construction

2 Design community conversations to gather constructive feedback.

Asking for general opinions about a project isn't the most productive time spent on community engagement. These opinions could be shaped by rumors, misinformation, past experiences with development in the community or a general fear of change, and they don't typically translate into meaningful, constructive feedback that can help shape project plans.

Rather than asking "so what do you think," develop a go-to list of questions tailored to where you're at in the development process and what specific information could help you demonstrate community need and shape project plans accordingly. It's also important to give options to choose from (multiple-choice style), which should be elements being considered as a part of the proposed plan.

Questions to Leverage During the Development Process

Development stage
Post acquisition

Goal
Understand community needs and priorities

Why
Discover how to create a project that reflects the unique qualities of the neighborhood

- What attracted you to this area to live/work/visit?
- How can we highlight the community's history and honor its roots and culture?
- What types of businesses do you most frequently use in the area?
- What would you say is the best quality of the area and what needs the most improvement?
- What would encourage you to spend more time in this area?
- What would you like to see more of?

Development stage
Project plan creation and socialization

Goal
Shape the specifics of development plans

Why
Incorporate community feedback to speed-up the approval process

- What types of retail businesses do you want to see incorporated into this project?
- This project includes added green/open space. Which uses of this space will be most beneficial for the community?
- What kinds of streetscape improvements would be most beneficial to the neighborhood?
- One goal of the project is to use placemaking design concepts to create a mixed-use community. What placemaking concepts interest you most?
- This project plans to add much-needed housing to the neighborhood. What types of new housing would you be most excited to see?
- Which alternative modes of transportation are you most likely to utilize as part of the redevelopment?

By asking specific, targeted questions, you ensure that community members can provide meaningful feedback - a win-win.

3 Share proactive updates with the community.

Most people don't understand the development process – how long it can take, the approvals needed, that proposed plans aren't set in stone. Quiet periods between news headlines or public meeting agendas can leave community members feeling anxious and unsettled.

Providing monthly updates about project progress showcases the developer's commitment to keeping neighbors informed and limits the spread of misinformation and falsehoods. This proactive approach also makes it easier to ask for letters of support or public comment when the time is right.

Five Types of Updates to Share

| Update	Purpose	Key details to include
Announcement of upcoming meeting	Drive supporter attendance and positive testimony or letters of support	• Meeting date, time and location (or Zoom link, if virtual) • The goal of the meeting • Why people should attend
Post-meeting recap	Update community members who could not attend and share next steps	• Summary of public comment • Recording (if virtual) • Next steps for the project • Actions that community members should take (i.e. letters of support)
A "stay tuned" message	Keep the community during projects lulls or when progress is happening behind the scenes	• Details on where the project stands in the development cycle • Specific questions that the community can provide feedback on
A response to community feedback received	Thank the community and share what you've heard	• A sincere thank you! • Summary of community feedback gathered so far (questions asked and responses) • How that feedback will be addressed
Highlight recent news or a project milestone	Demonstrate project momentum	• Milestone/news summary • What the next stage of approvals is • Critical community engagement needed next

4 Activate silent supporters.

Data shows that the people who give feedback at public meetings are overwhelmingly negative and don't reflect the socioeconomic diversity of the community. These disparities do more than make meetings combative. Even when they don't represent the majority opinion, vocal opposition puts projects at risk.

In 2018, Boston University researchers looked at meeting minutes for new housing developments in communities across Massachusetts. They found that attendees are, on average, older and more likely to be white than the average for the communities that they live in. They're also more likely to own their homes, rather than rent. Of the comments made by these attendees, only 15% were in support of the proposed project.

The people who don't attend public meetings are often those who would actually benefit from the project – renters, first-time homebuyers, new residents, young families, single parents, millennials. Perhaps these key audiences don't have childcare to attend an evening meeting, or they work second or third jobs. They may not feel comfortable attending if English is not their native language. They may not even know about the meeting or frankly, they just don't feel comfortable attending and speaking in front of a hostile crowd.

To activate these silent supporters, developers need a different way to reach them. That's where the new community engagement mix comes into play. It's time to give people the ability to provide their feedback without having to attend a public meeting. They should be able to go online and post a comment, question or letter of support or do so via text.

In 2020, many teams hesitantly made the pivot towards digital engagement out of necessity - and quickly became advocates. Online digital engagement also makes it far easier to engage in dialogue over a longer period of time since it doesn't take place at a public meeting – a single moment in time. Regardless of what the future holds, digital engagement is here to stay.

In-person meetings

Interactive online presence

Feedback via SMS
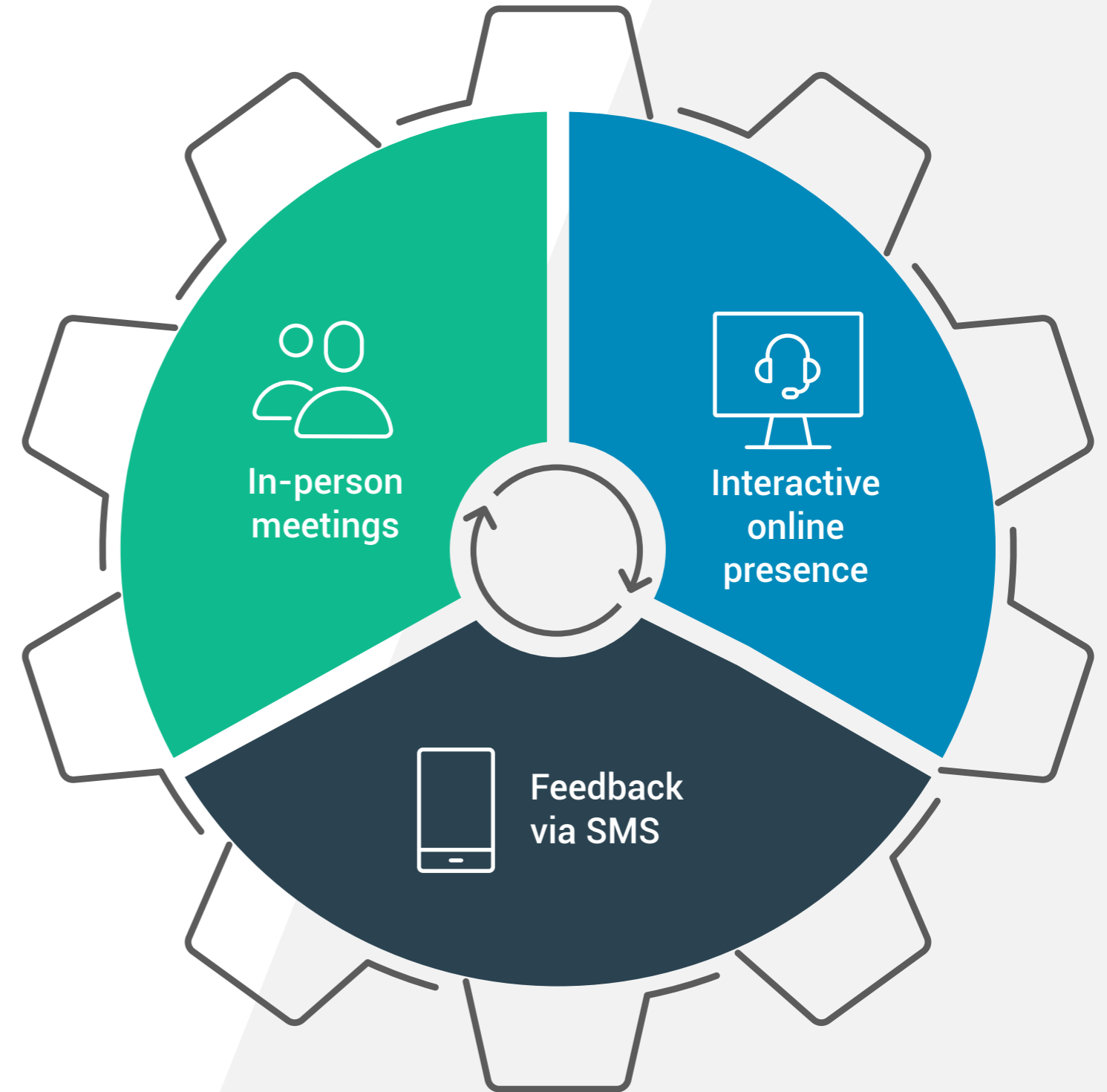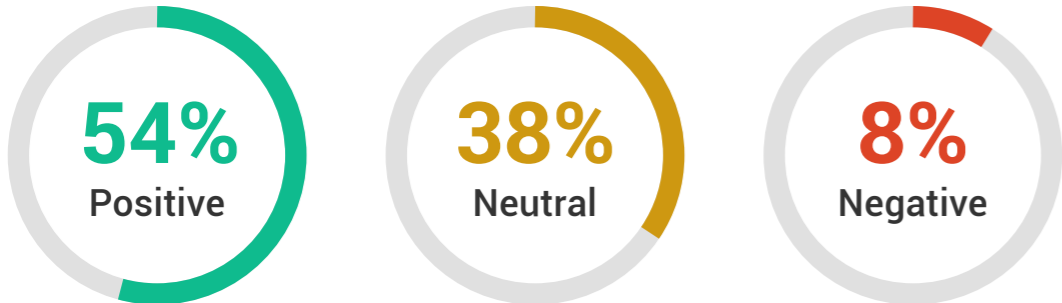
5 Combat emotions with facts.

Public meetings don't elicit happy vibes. People in the crowd are angry; meeting leaders and developers presenting at the podium are anxious. Vocal opponents at the mic rely on emotions and fear to drive home their points, rather than facts. That's the advantage that developers can have.

Let's say that you're a developer presenting at a typical public meeting and a community member has revved up the crowd by saying, "No one in the neighborhood wants affordable housing built here." The comment is met with cheers and applause. However, you know that's not really what the community – outside of that room – wants because you have the data that explains that 80% of the 300 public comments you've received so far are in support of fair housing being included in the project plans.

Digital community engagement should still allow community stakeholders to have a two-way dialogue with the project team. Responding to comments and questions not only can curry favor with community members, but it's a tremendous opportunity to publicly dispel misconceptions and combat misinformation with facts.

Responding with data lets development teams shut down vocal opposition by fighting emotions and vitriol with facts and figures. By analyzing overall public sentiment for a project and structuring community conversations to collect constructive feedback, project teams can share that data at public meetings so it's included in the public record.

JBG SMITH

JBG SMITH took this data-driven approach to gain unanimous approval for its National Landing (Crystal City) development, the future home of Amazon HQ2.

The development team was able to highlight that **70% of the nearly 900** public comments captured on their project website were positive, demonstrating a broad base of support for the project.

MacBook Pro

Sentiment

54%
Positive

38%
Neutral

8%
Negative

Conclusion

Traditional community outreach is flawed because it's one dimensional, centering around meeting-based engagement, even though developers and community leaders alike know that you'll hear the same obstructionist voices meeting after meeting. This is something that our team has known for a long time - and what we saw in 2020 supports that. Engaging with the community online complements a boots-on-the-ground strategy and builds a base of stronger community support. The result: developers gain much-needed data to shape project plans and gain approvals faster by understanding community needs from the very beginning.

About coUrbanize

coUrbanize is the only online community engagement solution purpose-built for real estate developers and municipal planners. Paired with traditional mechanisms for community engagement, coUrbanize has helped secure faster approvals on more than 400 projects across North America.

With coUrbanize, companies like Boston Properties, Alexandria Real Estate Equities and JBG Smith are gaining control of the engagement process and preventing the surprises and miscommunication that lead to costly project delays. Connect with us to learn more: sales@courbanize.com

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