



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON PROJECT OUTCOMES





HOW?

That's a question we're often asked when we talk about coUrbanize with development and planning professionals. Specifically, they want to know how the feedback we obtain from community members influences project outcomes. They wonder if the feedback is simply a mechanism to make people feel as though they have a voice. But that premise is counter to our mission, which is rooted in helping to build better neighborhoods. Our guiding truth: Community feedback can – and should – have a significant impact on project outcomes.

WHY IS COMMUNITY FEEDBACK IMPORTANT?

Sure, expressing opinions about projects makes people feel empowered. But gathering feedback is one thing; using it to inform decision-making is another. Omitting step two means that the feeling of empowerment is short-lived. Crucially, the omission endangers the economic success of projects – both for the developer and the community.

Omitting community feedback can endanger the success of a project

Therefore, we encourage project teams to take every opportunity to solicit community feedback and to incorporate that feedback into plans. This approach lends itself to a wide range of decision-making, including choices of public art installations, housing types, use of green space, streetscape improvements, traffic

improvements, retail offerings, space activation (e.g., event programming, farmers' markets), and the best ways to acknowledge and recognize local culture and history.

Feedback about these projects can help match public benefits to community needs – especially when these needs aren't obvious.



DIGGING DEEPER

Most real estate investment brings common benefits to a community, such as economic growth, jobs, affordable housing, and green space. Recognition of these benefits is wider than ever:

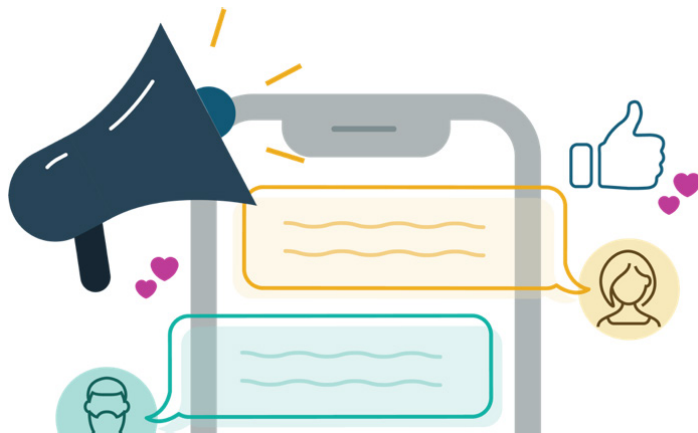
"I am pro-real estate development"

According to the results of our recent survey, public support for real estate development rose over the course of the pandemic, with 58% of respondents describing themselves as "pro-real estate development" compared to 49% in the 2020 survey.

But we can't assume that, despite the growing positivity toward development, one community's needs are identical to another's. It's difficult to determine these unless you

ask people who live and work nearby what it's like to be a part of the neighborhood – from what holds the community together to what needs to change to improve quality of life. One community might suffer from a lack of access to healthcare, while another might lack access to transportation.

Alternatively, the greatest needs might revolve around childcare, job training, or recreation areas (e.g., parks, trails, etc.). Developers who address these specific needs can turn less enthusiastic members of a community – and even naysayers – into supporters.



BUT THERE'S A BIG CAVEAT...

To do this right, project teams must start the process early. And, yes, this is counter-intuitive: Many project teams keep their plans under wraps until the latest possible moment because they fear opposition.

But to find out what people want and incorporate their feedback into a plan where possible, you need time on your side.

Rushed engagement efforts typically result in feedback from a vocal minority that tends to be whiter and wealthier than the rest of their neighbors.

By starting early, you can reach supporters who would otherwise go unheard. Starting early also prevents the spread of false rumors, allowing project teams to correct misinformation before the damage is done.

And ongoing communication – starting with a project's planning stage – fosters trust and bolsters a developer's reputation in the eyes of the community.





SO YOU WANT PROOF?

We're glad you asked because we've got plenty of evidence that the early bird catches not only the worm but also community support. Here are just a few examples of projects in which developers solicited feedback from community members early on and adjusted plans accordingly. Community buy-in, in turn, led to successful outcomes.

VIRGINIA VILLAGE

Leesburg, Virginia

Background

Keane Enterprises used coUrbanize to engage local residents in plans to convert a low-rise shopping center near Leesburg, VA, into a mixed-use development.

Community Feedback

Residents wanted to make sure that the Saturday farmers' market would continue at the site, that popular local businesses would have a presence at the site, that streetscapes would be improved with outdoor dining and live performance space, and that the site would offer better connectivity to downtown Leesburg.

Influence on Project

Keane adjusted its plans to include an outdoor pavilion where the weekly farmers' market could take place, outdoor dining and live performance space, and a pedestrian/bike bridge that led to downtown and the Washington & Old Dominion Trail.



Results

The team behind Virginia Village is still working through the approval process, but they went into it with more than 100 pages of data that showcased how they've involved the community and built support for their vision.

4200 WASHINGTON

Roslindale, Boston

Background

ARX Urban used coUrbanize to engage local residents in plans to convert a one-story retail building into a multi-story, mixed-use development with an affordable housing component.

Community Feedback

Local residents expressed concerns about density, parking, and the fate of existing retail tenants.

Influence on Project

ARX Urban reduced the height of the proposed building and set it farther back from a nearby school, provided off-site parking and a monthly stipend to existing retail tenants for use on public transportation, bike-share, or car-share programs; added parking space for electric car-share and greenspace, and widened sidewalks.



Results

The positive feedback from community members played an important role in persuading the Boston Planning and Development Agency to approve the project.

REDEVELOPMENT OF FACTORY SITE

Haverhill, Massachusetts

Background

Procopio Companies used coUrbanize to engage local residents in plans to build a housing development on the site of an abandoned shoe factory.

Community Feedback

Residents feared that a new development would increase traffic congestion.

Influence on Project

Procopio incorporated a major infrastructure overhaul into the plan to mitigate traffic. The design encompassed realignment with several main roads, sidewalk reconstruction, new bike lanes, and new traffic signal controls.



Results

Procopio obtained nearly unanimous approval for the plan from the Haverhill City Council.

SUSTAINABILITY AGENDA

Detroit, Michigan

Background

The City of Detroit's Office of Sustainability used coUrbanize to engage residents in the creation of its first Sustainability Action Agenda.

Community Feedback

6,800 Detroiters relayed what they liked about their neighborhoods and what they would change.

Influence on Project

The Office of Sustainability used the feedback to identify 43 actions and 10 goals.



Results

These actions and goals formed the foundation of the Sustainability Agenda, which was published in the summer of 2019, and which is now being implemented.

NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENTS

Brownsville, Brooklyn

Background

New York City's Department of Housing Preservation & Development (HPD) used coUrbanize to engage residents in setting goals for housing and neighborhood amenities in one of New York City's poorest areas.

Community Feedback

Residents offered hundreds of suggestions for neighborhood improvements.

Influence on Project

HPD leveraged coUrbanize for more than six months, collecting feedback through text messages and online comments about what residents would like to see more of, or what needed improvement.



Results

HPD incorporated the suggestions into its plan for the future of Brownsville, which included the creation of 2,500 new affordable homes and improvements to the neighborhood's cultural and recreational facilities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- By incorporating community feedback into project plans, developers, and planners pave the way toward successful outcomes.
- Priorities vary among different communities. It's critical to learn what the hot buttons are and ensure that project plans address them.
- Developers and planners should begin the engagement process as early as possible.
- Results of numerous projects that used the coUrbanize platform to engage communities confirms how effective this approach is.

CONCLUSION

Developers and planners who view community engagement as a necessary evil, or those who neglect to engage communities entirely, are missing an opportunity to create a better project. In contrast, inclusive outreach efforts timed to coincide with initial planning yield useful feedback that can be incorporated into projects, ensuring a high return on investment for owners and delivering what residents seek: livable, sustainable, and vibrant communities.



To learn more about coUrbanize or talk with a community engagement representative, reach out at sales@courbanize.com