

How to Create a Meaningful and Equitable Community Engagement Strategy



Introduction

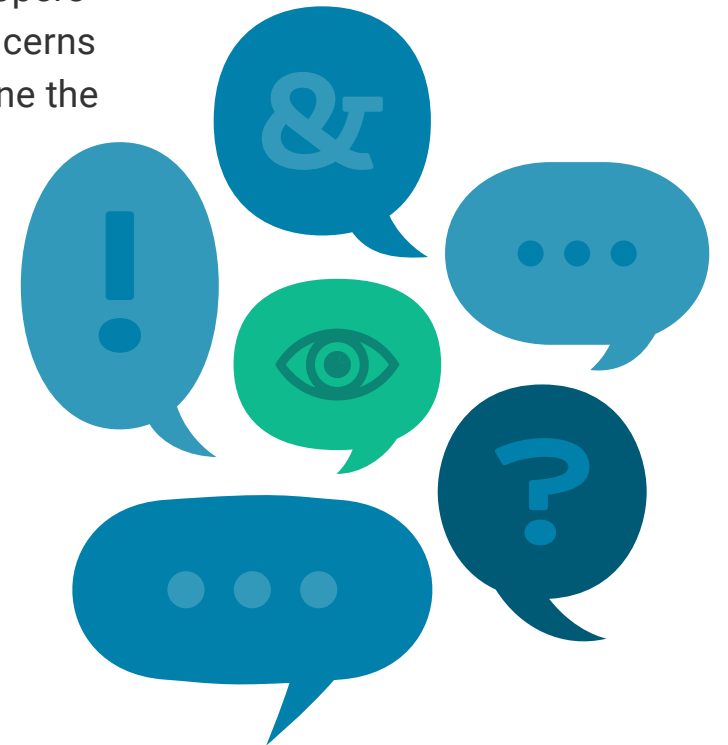
Earlier this year, we published [The New Community Outreach Playbook](#), which offers introductory tips for engaging communities in the development and planning process. The guide you're reading now builds on that playbook with more specifics on what effective engagement looks like. On the following pages, we present five recommendations and a template/timeline for activities intended to help you design an engagement strategy that is inclusive, influential, and successful.



1 Share your vision – early and openly

The foundations of meaningful and equitable community engagement are transparency and open communications from the onset of planning. Sometimes a fear of NIMBYism prompts developers to delay community outreach. But delays create obstacles down the road because silence fuels rumors. And it's difficult, if not impossible, to correct misinformation once it's taken root. To avoid this scenario, establish a two-way dialogue as [early](#) as possible.

Initial dialogue doesn't need to be formal. It could involve casual, friendly conversations with influential community members, such as local business owners or heads of nonprofits that focus on the neighborhood. By speaking with these community members, developers can learn more about priorities and concerns of area residents, which will help to refine the engagement strategy and the plans.



2 Build trust through interaction

Too often, developers expect too much from the community without giving anything in return. For example, a developer might ask people to show up and voice support at a public meeting without having made any attempt to get to know them. This qualifies as a major missed opportunity. After all, there are plenty of straightforward ways to establish mutually beneficial relationships. A developer can get involved with community events or local nonprofits, arrange free concerts or outdoor film screenings, install temporary art exhibits, host picnics, or sponsor local sports teams, to name just a few possibilities. Whatever the activity, higher levels of interaction – and visible investment in a community – promote higher levels of trust.



3 Continue the dialogue throughout the project lifecycle

The planning equivalent of resting on one's laurels is assuming that once you've secured initial support from the community, you're set. Hardly. It's essential to maintain the dialogue through every stage of a project.

Accordingly, avoid "quiet periods" as much as possible. We define quiet periods as silence that follows a public meeting or a project announcement. The communication should be ongoing, even if you believe that you've shared the most important information. Remember: many people view silence as suspicious. Here's where online communications can play an important role – provided it's part of a larger, inclusive strategy that reaches all stakeholders.



4 Strive to Engage *All* Stakeholders

Technology came to the rescue during the pandemic by allowing remote access to planning meetings. We found in our recent [survey](#), however, that although people appreciated the option to participate remotely, few actually took advantage of it.

That said, technology remains an important pillar of an engagement strategy. People may not wish to Zoom into a meeting at a specific time, but they may welcome participation through other channels, such as virtual chats, social media conversations, or texting.

But ... as we alluded to earlier, online communications don't reach all audiences, and that's an important factor to keep in mind. Remember that good old digital divide?

Some people do not have the latest technology tools at their disposal or simply may not wish to use them. An effective engagement strategy, therefore, combines online and offline communications.

The other vital ingredient in an effective engagement strategy is translation. More than 20% of U.S. residents speak a language other than English at home. This is why we launched a [Language Equity Plan](#), which requires translation for all projects on the coUrbanize platform that meet specific demographic criteria. This policy ensures that community members whose first language isn't English clearly understand the scope of proposed developments and can weigh in on the plans.



5 Cement trust by incorporating community-curated ideas in your plans

Once you've solicited feedback from community members, don't neglect the next critical step of integrating the feedback – where reasonable and feasible – into your plans. Almost as damaging as silence is soliciting feedback and ignoring it, which prompts feelings of betrayal. In contrast, when you integrate the feedback into your plans, you are showcasing your commitment to the community in a highly visible, meaningful way. And if you can't integrate the feedback, explain why.

How do you integrate feedback? First, funnel it to the appropriate member of the project team. Is it the architect, landscape architect, executive sponsor, or engineer? Second, make sure that you give the project team member in question enough time to make changes to the plan (as we've stated before, early starts are crucial).



Phased Engagement Plan

Here is a basic template for phased engagement that you can use as a starting point for your strategy:

PHASE ONE

Establish initial relationships

TIMELINE

3+ months

ACTIVITIES

- Identify and speak with key community members to learn more about the neighborhood and the priorities and concerns of residents.
- Support, host, or sponsor local events and organizations

PHASE TWO

Extend the dialogue to the wider community

TIMELINE

2+ months

ACTIVITIES

- Poll local residents.
- Allow residents to submit feedback through a variety of online and offline tools (e.g., voicemail, SMS, postcards, virtual chats).
- Update community members frequently through print and online media.

PHASE THREE

Demonstrate commitment

TIMELINE

6+ months

ACTIVITIES

- Show how you've taken community feedback into consideration. You can accomplish this during meetings (on-site, virtual, or hybrid), and/or through posted video presentations and reports.
- Continue to provide regular status updates.

PHASE FOUR

Document support

TIMELINE

3+ months

ACTIVITIES

- Compile reports on outreach results for city officials.
- Gather and showcase letters, comments, emails, and messages that indicate support for the project.

Conclusion

Some developers view community engagement in the planning process as risky or unnecessary. Yet community engagement is an essential component in the success of a project. Time-consuming? Yes. Complex? Yes. But if you adhere to best practices and break down your approach into phases, you can more easily shape an engagement strategy that propels positive outcomes – for developers and communities alike.

