

Ensuring Community Buy In for an Eco-Friendly Affordable Housing Project

POAH's plans for the Garfield Park affordable housing project incorporated community feedback to deliver a plan the whole community could be excited about



Through a competition in Spring 2019, the City of Chicago selected [Preservation of Affordable Housing](#) (POAH) to develop city-owned land at the corner of 5th Avenue and Kedzie, in the Garfield Park neighborhood, as an affordable housing community with neighborhood-serving retail.

The competition, which was implemented in cities around the world and sponsored by the [C40 Network of Cities](#) that tries to help cities tackle climate change issues, involved very little community input into design, aside from a small online survey and meetings held with bidders by local organizations. But before moving forward with next steps, POAH committed to the City that they would seek community input on what types of apartments would be planned, how much they cost, what amenities are included, what the building and landscaping looks like, and what type of retail businesses to recruit.



Unexpected but valuable community feedback

POAH's commitment to the City, whose Department of Housing is funding the project, was to build 70-80 affordable apartments and offer 9,000 square feet of retail space, while offering a number of features that would address the 10 Challenges for Climate laid out by the C40 program. As part of the building's mission to respond to climate change, the buildings were required to be Passive House certified, meaning they would have to meet the energy efficiency and comfort standards set by the Passive House Institute to ensure a minimal footprint, with solar installation to offset the majority of the energy used in the building.

With the specialization of the building, POAH felt an even bigger responsibility to demystify these features and give the community an ownership stake in its planning. Just as they were getting ready to roll out an engagement plan, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. When it was clear that it would be a long term disruption, POAH had to look to virtual engagement options, and found coUrbanize.

Launching their community engagement process shortly after the start of the pandemic, the team was unable to hold traditional in-person meetings and knew immediately that

they needed a website where community members could go for information and leave feedback in real time. It was also important that the solution be plug-and-play and was easy to build so their communications team wouldn't need to spend weeks setting it up.

POAH began their [community engagement and feedback program](#) in June 2020, sharing building renderings via the coUrbanize platform and virtual meetings, and asking community members for their feedback on design and neighborhood priorities. They had great feedback on interactive questions, social media shares and overall traffic on the site. When it came time to have larger meetings in early 2021, it was clear how important community engagement would continue to be.

Molly Ekerdt, Vice President of POAH's Chicago office, was initially surprised by the reaction. "We thought we had a lot of general support, but we had major pushback on the design in that first meeting," she says. "We knew we had a lot to learn and a lot of trust to build – but the initial response made us work even harder. We continued to lean on coUrbanize for feedback and to help us tell our story."



Creating a sense of project ownership



Taking into account the community feedback, the POAH team pivoted on the designs to address concerns about the look of the buildings, as well as the types of retail that were needed in the neighborhood, including healthy food options.

"We didn't get everything right the first time, but that respect for the importance of community engagement eventually permeated to every member of our design and development team," says Ekerdt. "We're proud of the number of people we've been able to engage. It feels like there's a lot of ownership – There are lots of committees and a large number of people who have had a hand in the planning."

"People are working different hours and can't always go to meetings," continues Ekerdt. "In person meetings are nice but virtual is so much more convenient. Using a website for community engagement to complement more traditional forms of meetings is here to stay."

POAH's Vice President for Community Partnerships, Felicia Dawson, agrees. "Working with coUrbanize has allowed us to engage an entirely broader audience that encourages more input from all over."

736 COMMENTS TOTAL

47% POSITIVE SENTIMENT

51% NEUTRAL SENTIMENT

4,715 USERS

6,411 SESSIONS

15 MONTHS FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT LAUNCH TO ZONING APPROVAL

A successful plan for the whole community

In November 2021, the Chicago Plan Commission approved zoning for the updated project plans after 15 months of community engagement. For Ekerdt, using coUrbanize was especially helpful for organizing the records of community support and feedback in one place and not having to dig through folders.

"When you're trying to organize information for a public entity, it can be a very legalized, bureaucratic process," says Ekerdt. "For us it was an easy record to build and send it off to city officials."

And the engagement hasn't ended there. POAH has continued to meet with their local committees, and their work includes a recent review of community survey data from their retail committee, voting for a name for the building, as well as hearing from local artists with ideas for the building. As POAH shared recently with the community, "You have amazing neighbors who volunteer their time to make sure this building reflects the community's interests."

Using coUrbanize, the POAH team:

- Incorporated residents' thoughts and ideas on design to create a more successful plan that both the project team and community were excited about
- Built trust and confidence that this project would improve the community and take into consideration their needs
- Eliminated inefficiencies in creating and managing an analog project website, and organized engagement history in one place



“ We didn’t get everything right the first time, but that respect for the importance of community engagement eventually permeated to every member of our design and development team. We’re proud of the number of people we’ve been able to engage. It feels like there’s a lot of ownership – There are lots of committees and a large number of people who have had a hand in the planning. ”

- Molly Ekerdt
Vice President, POAH