

Engaging a Broad User Base to Evolve a Navy Yard Into a Community Destination

The Philadelphia Navy Yard Connected Community Plan will define how the Navy Yard will evolve in the coming years to support new development



In July 2020, PIDC, Philadelphia’s public-private economic development corporation, announced a collaboration with consultant AECOM as well as the Philadelphia community at large to develop the Navy Yard Connected Community Plan, a strategic plan to connect businesses, employees, visitors, and future residents of the Navy Yard through technology, resources, and amenities.

The goal of the Connected Community Plan is to define how the 1,200-acre Navy Yard – housing not only a commercial shipyard, but also modern offices and laboratory buildings, a 4.5 acre park designed by renowned landscape architect James Corner, trendy restaurants, and a 340,000-square-foot bakery – will evolve into a regional employment hub and destination for events and visitors over the coming years. In order to create a 24/7 community all Philadelphia residents could be excited about, PIDC wanted to invite everyone in the community to participate in the plan to reimagine the Navy Yard.



Connecting with stakeholders despite a pandemic

Because the project launched shortly after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the AECOM team needed to adjust their engagement strategy based on a virtual environment, and with the realization that foot traffic at the site was greatly reduced. In order to drive the conversation, the team worked with coUrbanize to place signage at the site with QR codes linking directly to specific questions about the project. With the help of social media ads to targeted community members living near and visiting the site, they could then keep the conversation going with additional engagement.

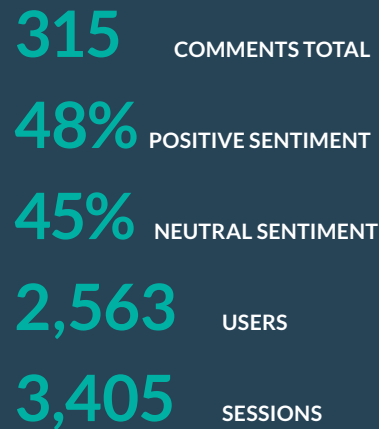
With the launch of the project site on coUrbanize in summer 2020, the project team included not only a section for written

comments and feedback to specific questions, but also an interactive map of the Navy Yard where visitors could click on different areas or features of the current site and create categorized comments that reflected whether current features were working well, could be improved, or were missing.

“We were able to capture responses from different user groups, which is exactly what we were hoping to do,” says Ian Champ, Project Manager at AECOM. “There was a nice mix of people who recreate at the site and people who work at the site. Groups like the cyclists wanted dedicated cycling lanes, while people who recreate at the parks wanted areas to picnic.”



Unstructured comments and “a-ha” moments



As the project evolved, the AECOM team began to realize they needed more unstructured feedback rather than just answers to specific prompts or questions. They struggled initially to come up with questions that would solicit the broad feedback they were looking for, and wanted to ensure visitors had a format to share whatever they envisioned for the Navy Yard.

“It was important to us to have a general thread for someone to just tell us what they’re thinking. We collected a lot of good comments that made us think and made us evolve how the next round of questions would be targeted,” says Champ. “The things that were our biggest a-ha moments came from the unstructured comments - they highlighted things the project team hadn’t thought about.”

This unstructured feedback helped the project team realize that their plans didn’t consider the physical infrastructure of transit stops, which were a major problem for the community. People who relied on public transit shared that only one stop in the area offered a bus shelter, which made it difficult to wait for the bus during bad weather.

“People were missing the bus because they were hiding by a building, and the bus wouldn’t stop because no one was visible,” says Champ. “That was great feedback that went into the report – transit was already going to be a focus, but that added specificity. Adding it in was not a huge add, but it was something that hadn’t been brought up before.”

A successful mix of qualitative and quantitative feedback

Community engagement for the project wrapped up in March 2022 with a total of 315 comments. For the AECOM team, being able to share not only the qualitative feedback but the number of sessions and engagement with PIDC was important in moving the project to its final planning stage so it could be submitted to the approvals board.

According to Champ, the initial draft of the plan that the team delivered to the approvals board met positive feedback, and the

board particularly appreciated the suggestions and comments around transit.

“We enjoyed working with the platform and appreciated the visual elements,” says Champ. “I think the community enjoyed using it, and it was certainly more participatory than similar projects I’ve worked on in the past.”

Using coUrbanize, the AECOM team:

- Incorporated community members’ unstructured feedback to create a transit plan that meets their needs
- Used physical signage and social media ads to spread the word in the community and drive further engagement
- Reached a variety of user groups to ensure the final project plan is something the entire community can support



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