

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CIVIC

BEST PRACTICES AND EXAMPLES FROM ACROSS THE STATE



michigan municipal league

WHY

Civic engagement is challenging, but without it, American communities wouldn't be what they are today. The country's history and representative democracy depends on people to identify, address, and resolve community issues.

ENGAGING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

ENGAGEMENT IS GOOD FOR THE COMMUNITY

Creating opportunities to meet and share ideas with residents helps build trust and increases transparency between the organizing entity and the public. Engagement opportunities can strengthen resident-to-resident relationships and connections to the community.

ENGAGEMENT AIDS ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

With good management and local ownership, great engagement can strengthen an organization's capacity. Organizations should use people and volunteers to their advantage.

ENGAGEMENT EASES IMPLEMENTATION

If residents have ownership over the project and numerous opportunities to share ideas and concerns, the end product will better reflect the needs and desires of the community. A solution that works, and that the community was involved in, is going to be more widely accepted.

ENGAGEMENT CAN BE THE BEST PART OF YOUR DAY

More than likely, you got into this work because you care about people and community. Engaging with the public can be extremely fun and rewarding if you keep a positive attitude and do your best to be respectful, transparent, and hard-working.

BEST PRACTICES

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

Every community is unique; strategies for great engagement will look different everywhere, depending on the topic of discussion, mindsets of residents, and end goal of the project, but best practices can be applied to every setting. The list below was derived from experiences of planners, directors, and community organizers across Michigan who want to encourage all communities to do more and better engagement.

Each recommendation is paired with a specific, but brief, Michigan case study to serve as an example and networking opportunity. All case studies have a direct point of contact and these experts have agreed to enhance a community of practice around engagement. Readers and practitioners are encouraged to learn more, reach out, and share stories so others can implement similar strategies in their own communities.



AGREE ON INSTITUTIONAL VISION, VALUES, AND CAPACITY FOR ENGAGEMENT

Before an entity (local government, nonprofit, business – whoever is implementing a plan that needs to engage the public) can do effective civic engagement, staff must agree upon and have a clear vision for what “engagement” means. Everyone involved in the project and key organizational leaders should:

- Create a shared vision for what engagement looks like;
- Identify values that will help guide the project; and
- Ensure the organization has the capacity (time, money, people, and knowledge) to meet the defined vision for engagement.

LEARN FROM THE TRI-COUNTY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

THE PROJECT

The Mid-Michigan Program for Greater Sustainability (MMPGS) is a project organized by the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission (TCRPC) focused on developing a variety of areas ranging from a regional housing study, to a community reinvestment fund, to a design portfolio for the Michigan Avenue Corridor.

WHAT THEY DID

Before project activities began, TCRPC worked with regional partners, participants, funders, and community leaders to identify what civic engagement should look like within the MMPGS plan. The group agreed stretching beyond traditional engagement approaches of public meetings and town-hall-style events would be the best way to collect ideas, information, and feedback from communities. For example, partners issued mini-grants to nonprofits to increase community involvement in planning, and used an online crowdsourcing platform, MindMixer, to collect wide public input and preferences on certain issues.

WHY IT MATTERS

Developing a common vision and goals for civic engagement at the start of the project is a great way to begin on the right foot. Once project partners determine a shared sense of direction, the group can better generate ideas and take ownership over specific areas.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Be inclusive and transparent throughout the process.
- The more outreach, the more capacity. The strong partnerships developed in planning will allow for greater capacity and resources in the future.
- Plans should adapt to reflect community input. The product should change and grow based on what residents and stakeholders share at meetings. It’s OK for the plan to change, as long as it’s changing because of what the community wants.

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DO ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT PROJECT IDEATION, FORMATION, AND IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing community projects is easiest when residents, businesses, and local institutions are seen as project partners; and to be true partners, they need to be involved in every step along the way. As soon as the entity decides to address a community issue, stakeholders should come to the table and determine:

- If the problem is worth addressing;
- Who is affected by the problem;
- Who else needs to be at the table; and
- The best ways to move forward.



WHAT THEY DID

Public engagement has been a critical element throughout the framework process. At the onset of the project, NWMCOG held a series of general information and input events to share with and learn from the general public to get a solid starting point. Throughout the project, NWMCOG held more focused group discussions and meetings with community stakeholder groups to ensure greater input from a range of the community. Organizers also created an opportunity for residents to participate in the planning process online through LetsDecideHow.org.

WHY IT MATTERS

Doing engagement throughout the framework’s process was vital to its success. For example, because local governments are responsible for determining whether and how framework strategies are implemented, their participation and buy-in in developing these strategies was imperative. Government officials needed to understand the framework, feel ownership over the work, and ensure their constituents’ concerns and ideas were worked into the plan.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Focus groups and one-on-one discussions occurring in places where people already are is far more effective than hosting and publicizing separate events, even when travel reimbursement or childcare is provided.
- Working groups or meetings specifically focused on local units of government were effective and positive due to a clear agenda, convenience (meetings were held over the lunch hour and lunch was provided), opportunities for networking, and direct appeal to provide local feedback on specific issues.
- Online participation venues offer important engagement alternatives for those unable or unwilling to attend meetings or events. However, residents won’t use websites consistently without regular outreach, and discussion topics must be timely and relevant.

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LEARN FROM THE NORTHWEST MICHIGAN COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

THE PROJECT

The Northwest Michigan Council of Governments (NWMCOG) developed *Framework for Our Future: A Regional Prosperity Plan for Northwest Michigan* to act as a guide for local and regional issues, such as transportation, housing, economic development, food, farming, community health, arts, and culture.



Photos: Northwest Michigan Council of Governments



BUILD A DIVERSE TEAM OF RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS TO GUIDE ENGAGEMENT

Although building and maintaining a strong stakeholder group can be challenging and time-consuming, the benefits of collaboration certainly pay off. The committee should gather a diverse group of community leaders who are affected by the topic, bring an interesting or creative perspective, or anyone who may particularly object to changing the status. Stakeholders should include: residents, business owners, nonprofit representatives, artists, school leaders, students, seniors, disabled residents, city officials, downtown development authority representatives, and others.

These partners should:

- Gain consensus on the committee’s roles and responsibilities;
- Develop guiding principles;
- Establish a shared vision and goals;
- Determine a skilled facilitator to manage the group: someone who can build agendas, run effective meetings, follow up on assigned tasks, manage diverse mindsets, and ask hard questions; and
- Be fully informed so representatives can be project spokespersons to their peers.

LEARN FROM THE CITY OF FLINT

THE PROJECT

Flint developed an updated, comprehensive master plan, *Imagine Flint*, to fit the city’s current and anticipated needs, with an emphasis on sustainable development, social equity, and adaptation.

WHAT THEY DID

To help ensure broad and effective engagement, the mayor, planning commission, and council developed a memorandum of understanding and authorized the formation of a Master Plan Steering Committee. Twenty-one members of the community were invited to join the committee to guide the project’s civic engagement and act as key community liaisons throughout the entire master planning process. Representatives included residents from each of the city’s nine wards, local business owners, youth, university students, retired law enforcement and educators, a hospital administrator, religious leaders, and well-known community organizers.

WHY IT MATTERS

A strong community stakeholder group provided many benefits to Flint and the master plan process. The steering committee helped ease communication, enhance transparency, and facilitate community ownership of the project. Because the committee well represented the community, these leaders could easily encourage others to get involved, which resulted in a well-supported final plan.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Develop a solid agenda for each meeting and have an experienced facilitator keep the group on task. Meetings with a clear goal and discussion questions will be the most productive.
- Strive for a committee that is an equal representation of the community.
- Ensure strong communication throughout the group and remind people about meetings and responsibilities.
- Keep things moving. Steering committee members will sometimes be tardy or miss meetings; keep the agenda focused and stick to decisions.

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Photos: City of Flint





BUILD CAPACITY THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS, TRUST, AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

INDIVIDUAL SCALE

Personal one-on-one and small group conversations with people of all ages, backgrounds, cultures, and local regions, are important to open lines of communication and build trust. These relationships will also help the organizing entity find local leaders to partner with and potentially join in other efforts over time. Working with residents as partners, rather than clients, can make engagement implementation easier, more effective, and more rewarding.

WHAT THEY DID

With a goal to reach all populations within Washtenaw County, the team allocated staff to work with representative community organizations that already had established relationships and open lines of communication with hard-to-reach residents. Through presentations at existing meetings, small group discussions with residents, and one-on-one conversations over cups of coffee, county officials were able to build relationships with residents, involve local leaders in project decision-making, and grow community leadership from the ground up.

LESSONS LEARNED

- It is important to engage community leaders from the very beginning so their values and ideas can be incorporated into the entire process.
- One-on-one face time between staff and community leaders is essential to making great engagement work.
- It's impossible to engage everyone, all the time, in every aspect of the work. Organizations should develop a community engagement plan that reflects the values of the group and has specific tools for engaging hard-to-reach populations.

WHY IT MATTERS

Individual partnerships and relationships with local leaders offered a way for planners to engage more directly with residents' needs and to build the base for on-going sustainability work. Strong community leadership ensures the implementation of the planning work beyond the life of the project because residents have more ownership and are more engaged in the community's future.

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LEARN FROM WASHTENAW COUNTY

THE PROJECT

Washtenaw County Office of Community and Economic Development led a project to expand sustainable housing options. The work focused on stabilizing distressed neighborhoods, growing economic opportunity throughout the county, and better connecting people to jobs, healthy food, and shopping options throughout the Washtenaw Avenue corridor.

Photos: Washtenaw County



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BUILD CAPACITY THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS, TRUST, AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

INSTITUTIONAL SCALE

Formal partnerships with local institutions are also important to the project's success. Explore potential partnerships with the local government, nonprofits, businesses, church groups, schools, and other institutions. Coordinate engagement activities with events partners are already hosting to ensure people will be in attendance – literally, meet people where they're at instead of asking them to attend an extra meeting in a potentially unfamiliar place. These institutional partners will be able to assist in outreach, research, implementation, and can help with credibility and community buy-in.

LEARN FROM SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

THE PROJECT

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) led a public education and awareness campaign to shift Southeast Michigan local governments, stakeholders, and residents towards understanding and supporting concepts of sustainability. Topics and discussions focused on issues ranging from walkability and alternative transportation, to accepting density and more focused city services, to adapting to the needs of emerging economic sectors.

Photos: Southeast Michigan Council of Governments



WHAT THEY DID

In order to reach a broad and diverse resident and stakeholder group, SEMCOG partnered with Matrix Theatre Company, a nonprofit playhouse in Southwest Detroit, and CultureSource, an arts and culture professional association. The groups used theatre to get messages of sustainability and resiliency to their audiences, but also received feedback and input directly from audience members through table discussions, group work, and surveys. The partnership allowed for complex regional issues to be presented and discussed in an interactive, fun, and dynamic manner.

WHY IT MATTERS

Engagement through creative focus groups and a theatre production provided a unique method of bringing together public and private participants to explore issues of placemaking, personal interaction, and regional responsibility. Reaching out through unique measures, venues, and processes was important because regional issues need a comprehensive approach: engagement through art was a method that brought a diverse set of stakeholders together to deliberate on these important issues.

LESSONS LEARNED

- When attempting a new and creative method of engagement, traditional measures of success and reporting requirements may not align or be representative. Use more illustrative, story telling methods of recording feedback to better capture main discussion topics. This requires staff to discuss events right after they happen, pull out key ideas and concerns, and evaluate processes.
- Arts-based engagement activities can help humanize the facilitating organization by making it seem more approachable, open-minded, and welcoming. Use social media to your advantage!
- Determine partner roles and responsibilities early on to avoid issues. Matrix, for example, ended up being almost solely responsible for creative engagement events – it's what they're great at. Although SEMCOG representatives were present at events, Matrix took full ownership of the work.

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CREATE A CAMPAIGN, SENSE OF URGENCY, AND CELEBRATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO KEEP THE MOMENTUM GOING

Community planning is usually a long, multi-year process and participants sometimes experience planning fatigue. To build and maintain excitement, create a fun campaign around the project. For example:

- Have stakeholders name the project so it's easier to talk about and promote;
- Encourage participants to develop and use strategic talking points and fun messaging to share and promote information and events. Use social media, photos, news articles, and presentations to inspire residents and get people on-board;
- Use controversy, personal stories, data, and other methods to illustrate urgency in the project and get people involved;
- Create a campaign timeline with specific goals and events that participants can meet in order to experience progress;
- Celebrate even small accomplishments to keep the planning fun and the process moving forward.

WHAT THEY DID

The city of Grand Rapids established the Michigan Street Corridor Steering Committee to lead engagement, community partnerships, and develop a fun, public campaign around the work. The committee determined a project timeline with distinct phases to space events and share data. After each engagement activity, the committee worked with project staff to build upon previous activities and show the project's progress to the public.

WHY IT MATTERS

The steering committee's work to create a fun, public campaign around the project was a great way to get residents to learn and get excited about the plan. Being transparent about the timeline, progress, and incorporating fun activities promoted the project, got extensive resident involvement, and avoided planning fatigue.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Steering committee members should be fully informed so they can become spokespersons for the project to their peers.
- Outreach and engagement tools should take the "show on the road" to places where citizens are comfortable meeting
- Be creative with engagement activities (games, field trips, speaker series, etc.). Engagement tools and activities should make citizens feel part of the process and build ownership.
- Be clear about the process and ensure residents understand what comes next. Layer information gathered at each engagement activity into the following activity to show progress, but with a new series of questions to gain direction.

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Photos: City of Grand Rapids



LEARN FROM THE CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS

THE PROJECT

The Michigan Street Corridor Plan is a comprehensive model addressing how to design a mixed-use and multi-modal corridor based on a community's vision, and provides strategic recommendations for implementation. Planning themes included: vibrant places (housing, economic development and institutional growth), transportation systems, and quality of life (health, safety and amenities).



DOCUMENT ENGAGEMENT SUCCESSES AND FAILURES, EVALUATE, AND MAKE CHANGES ACCORDINGLY

Communities should be creative in documenting engagement to illustrate hard work, transparency, community involvement, and results: take pictures, tell stories, write articles, do interviews, track interactions, record events, and keep records internally, but also promote findings through social and traditional media outlets. After each engagement event, organizers should evaluate and debrief on how to move forward and improve. Using a simple “SWOT Analysis” type of discussion (assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) can be an effective way to learn from mistakes and expand on new opportunities. Distributing process-based evaluations to event participants can also help determine ways to improve in the future.

Tracking topics, questions, and responses that arose throughout the engagement event is key to determine the agenda and action items for the next meeting. Organizers must build in a feedback loop and actually use recommendations and ideas collected at public meetings.

WHAT THEY DID

Marquette planners tracked engagement activities by collecting newspaper articles, flyers, and promotional material related to the work. Leaders also created a Facebook page for the project to better communicate with residents, track activity, share ideas and information, and gain feedback on specific issues. Project leaders developed an evaluation form to record public involvement and track ideas coming out of events. The form included:

- Event details (date, time, facilitator, number of attendees);
- Summary of public comments, concerns, and interests;
- Information learned;
- What, when, and how information will be followed-up on, as well as who is responsible for doing the work; and
- Process information, such as what worked, what needs to be changed, and how the information will be shared with the project team.

WHY IT MATTERS

Creating and following an effective outreach and documentation strategy is important to building a

positive institutional culture for engagement. Documenting and evaluating what happened at events improves process, ensures practice continuity, and allows for a productive public feedback loop. Publicly sharing this information through traditional and alternative media outlets improves transparency, humanizes the process, and legitimizes the work because it’s clear how the final product came about – from residents and stakeholders.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Rely on multiple means of communication for outreach and feedback (social and traditional media).
- Providing an educational component to events, like a presentation on placemaking or urban design, can add value to public events or charrettes and boost attendance.
- One-on-one engagement and site visits are essential to understanding community issues and persuading critics. Keeping track of these communications can be challenging, but make sure to record key ideas, concerns and questions raised during these conversations.

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Photo: City of Marquette

LEARN FROM THE CITY OF MARQUETTE

THE PROJECT

Marquette’s Third Street Corridor Sustainable Development Plan outlines the creation of a vibrant, mixed-use corridor that connects downtown to Northern Michigan University and surrounding neighborhoods.



HAVE FUN

No one said this work was going to be easy but the only way to do great engagement is to stay open minded, positive, and energized! Although frustrating and challenging at times, effective engagement is a way to find solutions that will improve residents' quality of life, increase opportunities, and positively impact the local economy. Don't forget to enjoy the project and the people with whom you're working.

LEARN, PRACTICE, AND
DISCUSS ENGAGEMENT:
RESOURCES AND
ADDITIONAL READINGS

"Beyond Citizen Engagement: Involving the Public in Co-Delivering Government Services," P. K. Kannan and Ai-Mei Chang, IBM Center for the Business of Government, January 1, 2013: <http://www.businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/Beyond%20Citizen%20Engagement.pdf>.

"Bright Spots in Community Engagement," Christopher Hoene, Christopher Kingsley and Matthew Leighninger, National League of Cities, April 1st, 2013: http://www.nlc.org/Documents/Find%20City%20Solutions/Research%20Innovation/Governance-Civic/BrightSpots-FINAL_4-26.pdf.

"Knight Soul of the Community 2010, Why People Love Where They Live and Why It Matters: A National Perspective," The Knight Foundation: <http://www.soulofthecommunity.org/sites/default/files/OVERALL.pdf>.

"Outcomes of Participatory Zoning in Grand Rapids," Martha S. Feldman and Kathryn S. Quick, *UC-Irvine*, August 1, 2007: http://www.mayorsinnovation.org/images/uploads/pdf/11_-_Feldman_Quick_memo.pdf.

"Planning for Stronger Democracy: A Field Guide for local Officials," Matt Leighninger and Bonnie C. Mann, National League of Cities: <http://www.nlc.org/Documents/Find%20City%20Solutions/Research%20Innovation/Governance-Civic/planning-for-stronger-local-democracy-gid-nov11.pdf>.

"Tackling Wicked Problems Takes Resident Engagement," Mike Huggins and Cheryl Hilvert, *PM Magazine, International City/County Management Association, Vol. 95, #7*, International City/County Management Association, August 1, 2013: <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9507/public/cover.cfm?title=Tackling%20Wicked%20Problems%20Takes%20Resident%20Engagement%20%20&subtitle=&author=Mike%20Huggins%20and%20Cheryl%20Hilvert>.

"The Pitfalls & Corresponding Best Practices of Online Civic Engagement: A Case Study in Salt Lake City," *Peak Democracy*, May 20, 2014: http://www.mayorsinnovation.org/images/uploads/pdf/13_-_ICMA_SLC.pdf.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:
PLACEMAKING.MML.ORG/ENGAGEMENT**



Photo: Washtenaw County



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