

Metropolitan Council Public Engagement Plan

Partnering with people to make regional decisions, fostering engagement

The Twin Cities metropolitan area is a thriving region of nearly 3 million people living in a wide range of communities – from open, undeveloped spaces to growing suburban communities and lively dense cities at its core. Together, these communities have emerged as a world-class metropolitan area – a great place to live, work and do business.

At the heart of this thriving region are planning discussions and decisions that guide how our region's communities grow – the people who will live and work here now and in the future. Our region is currently undergoing a transformative process that will result in an increasingly diverse population – by 2040, about 40% of the population will be people of color.

These regional planning decisions must be rooted in the needs of the people. As the designated planning entity for the Twin Cities region, the Metropolitan Council has elevated and called out the need for including the full range of voices at the table. This Public Engagement Plan provides the vision and the process for engaging the full range of community constituents in regional decision-making.

Introduction – A New Approach to Engagement

The Twin Cities region is made up of seven-counties – Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington counties – includes 186 local cities, as well as several unincorporated townships in the more rural parts of the region. The Metropolitan Council creates and implements the long-range development guide for the region, called *Thrive MSP 2040* (last approved in May 2014). This guide is updated every 10 years and several policy and systems plans result from it, including the *Transportation Policy Plan*, *Regional Parks Policy Plan*, *Water Resources Policy Plan*, and *Housing Policy Plan*. In addition to these important policy and system plans, *Thrive MSP 2040* also calls for an enriched *Public Engagement Plan* that serves as a guide on how to approach the public planning process for all Metropolitan Council activities.

Often, when people think about planning, they focus on the things: buildings, streets, green space, roads, and transit. But planning is really about people, about the communities we call home. It is about where we work, where our families will grow, and hopefully, where they'll prosper, and where we'll connect with one another.

The goal of this *Metropolitan Council Public Engagement Plan* is to make a shift in the planning process from thinking about traditional outreach and participation processes to an engagement model that fosters shared problem solving, supportive partnerships and reciprocal relationships. To truly foster that kind of collaboration equitably, the Metropolitan Council has asserted the need to engage the diverse range of community interests in the process to plan for our communities and in structuring engagement related to those decision-making processes. The region needs the full range of voices at the table to understand issues, explore alternatives, and create a shared action plan to address issues.

Included in this plan is helpful background information on the Metropolitan Council, *Thrive MSP 2040*, the process of putting this plan together, and definitions of terminology used throughout. It will also highlight the guiding principles of engagement and lay out the new strategic approach to public engagement called for in *Thrive MSP 2040*. Throughout this document you will also find links to additional helpful information.

Background Information about Regional Planning

The Metropolitan Council

The Metropolitan Council was created by the Minnesota Legislature and Governor Harold LeVander in 1967. Ever since, the Metropolitan Council has played a key role in coordinating regional growth and planning for the Twin Cities Metropolitan area. There are 17 members of the Council – 16 members that are appointed to represent geographic districts and a chair appointed at-large. The members are appointed by the governor and serve terms of up to four years that align with the term of the governor. Members may serve multiple terms.

The Council provides the following services for the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan region:

- **Plans for Future Growth of the Region:** The Council plans for future growth and makes strategic, efficient public investments to support the region’s high quality of life and economic competitiveness.
- **Operates Metro Transit:** Every day, Metro Transit serves bus and rail passengers with award-winning, energy-efficient fleets (nearly 85 million in 2014 or nearly 90% of all regional transit rides). These strategic investments support a growing network of bus and rail transitways, and transit-oriented development.
- **Collects and Treats Wastewater:** This region collects and treats wastewater at rates 40% lower than peer regions, while winning national awards for excellence.
- **Protects and Monitors Clean Water:** The Council works to ensure adequate clean water for the future through water supply planning and lake and river monitoring programs.
- **Develops Regional Parks and Trails:** The Council plans and develops a world-class regional parks and trails system made up of more than 50 parks and park reserves and more than 340 miles of interconnected trails.
- **Provides Affordable Housing:** The Council creates and supports affordable housing opportunities throughout the region by providing affordable housing through the Metro Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) and establishing regional housing policies and planning.

Thrive MSP 2040

Under Minnesota state law, the Council is responsible for preparing a comprehensive development guide for the seven-county metropolitan area called *Thrive MSP 2040*, which provides a framework for a shared vision for the future of the region over the next 30 years. The Council is responsible for

developing *Thrive* and the plans for the three statutory regional systems—wastewater, transportation, and regional parks—as well as a housing policy plan. These system plans provide specific information to assist local governments in creating consistent, compatible, and coordinated plans that strive to achieve local visions within the regional and help ensure an efficient and cost-effective regional infrastructure.

In addition to providing the policy foundation for regional planning, *Thrive MSP 2040* also calls for greater attention to fostering equity both in policies and in engaging residents of the region. It recommends a regional public engagement strategy that assures policies are reflective of all the region's residents and supports prosperity for all; particularly historically underrepresented populations (people of color, people with disabilities, people with lower incomes), people of all ages, and other traditionally marginalized groups.

Within *Thrive MSP 2040*, the Council is also committed to collaborating with partners in local governments, communities of faith, communities of color, service providers, schools, and other advocates to better coordinate goals and desired outcomes and engage a cross-section of the region's population in decision making.

This commitment to equity and collaboration detailed in *Thrive MSP 2040* will require new approaches for the Council. This Public Engagement Plan will help the Council work towards greater collaboration and problem-solving with members of the broader Twin Cities communities, and work toward the principle of making decisions with people, rather than for people.

Public Engagement Plan Development

In addition to being called for in the *Thrive MSP 2040* plan, this Public Engagement Plan results from partner feedback and local lessons learned through the Corridors of Opportunity effort, as well as the good work of communities around the country. Specifically, the Community Engagement Steering Committee leadership with the support of the Community Engagement Team – both established through the Corridors of Opportunity effort – were key partners in creating this plan and the principles within it. Their work shows innovation and a commitment to engaging all communities, particularly those historically underrepresented and underresourced in the Twin Cities region.

The Council's Director of Communications and Outreach Team Manager are responsible for managing and implementing this Public Engagement Plan, and collaborating with other outreach staff across the Council's operating divisions to assure consistent application of the plan and its principles.

Useful Definitions

Throughout this Public Engagement Plan we talk about the need for better outreach and engagement. For the purposes of this plan, we thought it would be helpful to clearly define what each of these critical actions mean in reference to the Metropolitan Council's work.

Outreach: Outreach is quite simply "the act of reaching out" and initiating contact with individuals, groups, or institutions. Outreach activities are often *transactional* in nature, or focused on collecting public input or reaction to a specific idea or proposal. This involves identifying and reaching out to the

individuals, communities, constituencies and organizations that can help ensure a unique and authentic perspective is gathered, for the decision-making processes of the Council and for specific projects.

Engagement: Engagement is the act of intentionally organizing individuals, communities, constituencies and organizations to help the Council generate ideas, better understand issues, identify concerns and considerations, and help with problem-solving for the work they do. This organizing can be done through many different avenues such as websites, meetings, events or one-on-one conversations. In contrast to outreach, engagement is *relational and ongoing*, or multi-directional interactions. Engagement moves beyond simply identifying “who” we need to reach out to and embraces a strategic approach to building lasting relationships. This work involves creating *specific engagement plans* around a project, as well as the effort to build more ongoing communication that will help gain a *deeper community connection and understanding*, provide ongoing relevance and awareness, and help leverage community momentum and interest for the ongoing work of the Council.

During the process to create this plan, community leaders created the following statement about the power of community engagement, which feeds the principles and values articulated in this plan:

In public decision-making processes, community engagement is an intentional, strategic, purposeful process to connect and empower individuals and communities. It is multi-dimensional and flexible to meet residents of a locale or members of a broader community where they are and engage diverse and historically underrepresented communities to achieve equitable outcomes. An accessible, respectful community engagement process is proactive, culturally appropriate, inclusive, and ongoing, with both short-term and long-term impact.

True community engagement goes beyond consultation to authentically facilitate community involvement in decision-making. It recognizes the value of building relationships and leadership capacity among agencies, community organizations, and residents. It provides ongoing relevance and awareness, and helps leverage community momentum and interest.

True community engagement results from intentionally organizing individuals and communities to understand issues, identify concerns and considerations, and engage in problem-solving. It cannot strictly begin and end with one or more self-contained projects, but needs to build upon each effort by deepening community connections and understanding. While enriched by participation by individuals, it must not strictly rely on volunteer efforts or people with means and time to participate, but must be structured with the understanding that accommodations and financial support are required to deepen involvement.

Public Engagement Principles

Planning requires collaboration to create shared values and outcomes. Our region needs the full range of voices at the table to understand issues, explore alternatives, and create a shared action plan to address issues.

At the very least, this requires a shift from traditional outreach and participation processes to an engagement model that fosters shared problem solving, supportive partnerships and reciprocal

relationships. Though one entity may have the authority or budget to complete a project, success requires coordinated collaboration of a range of partners, which bring the range of perspectives and expertise to strengthen the process.

While public outreach and public participation processes encourage people to be involved in public decision-making, engagement – the process that recognizes the value of creating ongoing, long-term relationships for the benefit of the greater community – brings the interactive, collective problem-solving element into the process that capitalizes on the collective strengths of various stakeholders.

People are experts in assessing the long-term needs of their personal experiences and interactions with the places they live and work. This Public Engagement Plan recognizes people as full and equal partners in the region’s decision-making processes at all levels. Specifically, it outlines the responsibilities and commitments of the Metropolitan Council to engage the public and key constituencies in regional planning, and provides guidance for communities in the region to help establish some consistency in best practices for engagement.

The Metropolitan Council places a high priority on outreach and engagement work for regional planning and infrastructure projects. For the most part, the level of effort has been on a project by project basis and varied widely in scope. One goal for this Public Engagement Plan is to make sure there is an ongoing commitment to integrate meaningful outreach and engagement into the fabric of everyday work of the Council members and staff and make sure that the following principles are front and center when approaching their work.

1. **Equity:** The *Thrive MSP 2040* plan places new emphasis on the importance of engaging communities equitably, to intentionally engage both historically underrepresented and underresourced communities such as communities of color, cultural communities and immigrants, people with disabilities, low-income individuals, the elderly, and youth in a way that more directly addresses existing social inequalities. Equitable outcomes are shared outcomes – they reflect the values and needs of the community collectively – including the neighborhood, city, county, or broader community – as it relates to planning, whether broadly or on a specific project. These outcomes specifically address communities commonly left out of the decision-making process. Engaging equitably means approaches to problem-solving need to be flexible and accessible to people and recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach may be equal, but does not equip participants to achieve desired outcomes.
2. **Respect:** Residents and communities should feel heard and their interests included in decisions. The time and investment of all participants is valuable and it is important that community members clearly understand the tangible benefits for their participation in a project. Whenever possible and appropriate, funds should be made available to community organizations (primarily non-profit organizations) to participate and engage their constituencies.
3. **Transparency:** Planning for engagement efforts and decisions being made throughout the process should be open and widely communicated. Discussions and problem-solving should occur early in a project process and on an ongoing basis to solidify long-term relationships. Effort should be coordinated to provide sufficient context about how all the policy and systems

plans work together. All materials will be presented in plain language, and with detail appropriate to the audiences. Translation of materials and interpretation services will be provided when necessary. Some of the items participants should know upfront are timelines for decision making, who has the power to make decisions, how their input be used, and how to track project progress. In addition, participants should have the opportunity to interact with decision-makers, ask questions, and jointly wrestle with policy decisions.

4. **Relevance:** Engagement occurs early and often throughout a process to assure the work is relevant to residents and communities. Effective engagement involves preliminary consultation about the community's values related to an issue, the appropriate method and venue for engagement, and establishing expectations for ongoing communication and engagement. The experience should reflect shared learning and multi-directional problem-solving and should address issues that a locale or broader community has identified, not merely the project-specific needs of the Metropolitan Council.
5. **Accountability:** residents and communities can see how their participation affects the outcome; specific outcomes should be measured and communicated. Each project and planning effort should include an assessment of the affected communities and appropriate measures of success, inclusion, and culturally appropriate approaches and communication techniques. In addition, the Council will periodically report back to constituencies and communities regarding how these goals are being met. The Council's engagement process will also include ongoing evaluation measures that will allow the team to adjust their work to make sure expected outcomes are achieved. As always, these updates and changes need to be clearly, and widely communicated to all those involved.
6. **Collaboration:** Engagement involves developing relationships and understanding the value residents and communities bring to the process. Decisions should be made with people, not for people. The Council is committed to collaborating with partners in local governments, communities of faith, communities of color, service providers, schools, and other advocates to better coordinate goals and desired outcomes and engage a cross-section of the region's population in decision making. When appropriate, the Council will convene multiple partners to create shared plans and strategies – particularly in addressing areas of concentrated poverty and related disparities that Council investments might influence. In the process of collaboration, if community organizations are serving as experts for planning and implementing outreach strategies, they should be compensated.
7. **Inclusion:** Engagement should remove barriers to participation that have historically disengaged residents and communities. Meetings, problem-solving sessions, and other in-person interactions should be planned with advance notice to participants, and a clear understanding of what to expect at the meeting. There should be opportunities to participate at other times and in other ways. Opportunities should be promoted widely through multiple means to reach all relevant audiences. Events should be held at times and places where people naturally convene, with an opportunity to enhance community connections. When appropriate, accommodations should be made to remove barriers to participation (such as transportation, childcare or activities for children, food, etc).
8. **Cultural Competence:** Engagement should reflect and respond effectively to racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic experiences of people and communities. Engagement efforts should

work to mitigate existing racial, ethnic, cultural or linguistic barriers and include diverse races, cultures, genders, sexual orientations, and socio-economic and disability statuses.

STRATEGIES

While this plan identifies engagement strategies that reflect commonly used practices in regional planning efforts, as well as communications and engagement practices, it is intended to put the spotlight on emerging and more robust strategies that focus on the idea that public engagement efforts strengthen planning processes and help create better results. Strategies will be considered and planned as appropriate for various efforts – some strategies will not work for certain projects or on an ongoing basis. This plan also recognizes the value of long-term relationship-building between the Council, local governments and local officials, and the community at-large.

General Strategies for Outreach

- **Conduct Engagement Planning:** A specific engagement plan will be created for each of the Council's large planning efforts to detail activities, timelines, outcomes, and evaluation processes for engagement opportunities. These activities will be planned by collaboratively setting goals and outcomes with stakeholders and will build a regular reporting plan into each effort. A central part of these plans will include the Metropolitan Council collaborating directly with the public and commonly underrepresented populations (people of color, immigrants, low-income populations, people with disabilities, the elderly, youth), as well as community advocates, and partners in regional public engagement. The Council will also create engagement plans for smaller-scale planning efforts and activities that support the organization's strategic policy and operational goals.
- **Have a Presence in the Communities:** Engagement is about building long-term, lasting relationships, and it's important for Council members and staff to be present in and connected to communities in order to build long-term relationships. This means participating in other community conversations, events, and activities, even when the Council might not have a specific role in an event or conversation. This also means planning unstructured or less formal interactions to learn from residents, local governments, communities, and other stakeholders – who are also customers.
- **Better Leveraging Existing Partnerships:** In order to deepen the level of engagement in the metropolitan region, it is important that the Council leverage partnerships that are being formed across all sectors of the work.
- **Utilize Existing Advisory Bodies:** The Council's advisory bodies provide key opportunities for engaging stakeholder participation. They should allow members, representing a cross-section of key stakeholder groups in the region, to help shape regional plans and policies. The Council appoints members of the general public, local elected officials, professionals with technical knowledge and experience, or representatives of groups, identified in state law, according to the responsibilities of particular advisory bodies. Advisory bodies may recommend studies, recommend action to the Council's standing committees, and/or provide expert advice.

- **Create Additional Strategic Consultative Groups:** The Council will appoint policymaker and technical groups to advise on the updates to Council policy plans and initiatives when appropriate. If possible, they will include business and community interests or create specific groups to address the need. There should be a specific emphasis put on recruiting people from historically underrepresented and underresourced communities. These consultative groups should have a specific role in directing the activity they are advising, such as setting meeting agendas that include an updated progress report on the project.
- **Produce Engagement Studies:** When there is an opportunity within the different advisory boards to recommend studies, they should consider including a study of engagement efforts which will help guide Council policy and system plans in the future.
- **Highlight Best Practices in the Field:** The Council’s Outreach Unit, within the Communications Department, will also be tracking best practices and highlighting community engagement work on the federal, state and local levels that support the principles in this plan and expands the region’s understanding of successful community engagement. The Council website will have a frequently updated page that highlights best practices for engagement, and providing links to key information and resources on engagement.
- **Provide Guidance for Local Governments:** As identified in *Thrive MSP 2040*, the Council will provide technical assistance and information resources to support local governments in advancing regional outcomes and addressing the region’s complex challenges. Specifically, the Council is poised to support local governments in community engagement efforts related to its comprehensive planning processes, as well as any other efforts that affect the broader community and would benefit from engagement of the broader community.
- **Convene Regional Discussions:** As identified in *Thrive MSP 2040*, the Council and staff may convene stakeholders around the region periodically to discuss specific policy issues, regional trends or emerging challenges, or to provide an opportunity for Council members to hear from the region’s residents and community leaders and get a pulse of what’s happening in the communities across the metropolitan area. Another function of these sessions would be to provide members of the community with information and an opportunity to inform and influence planning processes.
- **Use Online Interactive Spaces:** The Council will use creative and easy-to-access online platforms to gather feedback and foster discussion about Council planning activities and policy plan content, as well as to hear what is going on in communities across the region.

Measuring Success

For the Council, accountability includes a commitment to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the policies and practices toward achieving shared outcomes and a willingness to adjust course to improve performance if needed. The Public Engagement Plan will have both qualitative and quantitative measures that will be used throughout.

The following are some of the steps that the Council will take to measure and evaluate their work around engagement on specific projects:

1. **Before the Project:** At the beginning of each project-related planning effort, Council staff will perform an assessment of groups that will be directly affected or may have an interest. For Council-wide planning efforts, that will always include a broad array of regional stakeholders. Audience assessments will specifically address groups that are historically underrepresented in planning efforts.
2. **During the Project:** Following this initial assessment, staff will consult with community organizations, and other stakeholders to confirm the audience needs and to begin planning for engagement related to the effort. This will include discussion about goals for engagement and desired outcomes.

Once goals have been established, a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures will be put into place to evaluate the success of the public engagement activities. Evaluations will take place on an ongoing basis throughout the project. Periodic evaluations will be followed by mid-project assessment to assure strategies will result in expected outcomes and staff will make necessary adjustments.

3. **Conclusion of the Project:** At the conclusion of a project, staff will first survey participants to assess the following qualitative elements:
 - Were the methods and structure of the outreach effort engaging?
 - Did they feel their time and opinions were valued?
 - Did they understand the goal of the outreach effort and their role?
 - Was their contribution reflected in the final product?
 - Would they participate in another Council outreach activity?
 - Did they hear regular updates about progress on the project?
 - Their opinions regarding the overall quality of their experience with the Council and the engagement effort.

Staff will also call together partner agencies for a meeting to debrief on the outreach efforts, including what worked, what didn't, lessons learned and what could be improved upon for future efforts. In addition, staff will survey partners who were involved in setting goals and expectations for the effort to assess whether expected outcomes were achieved.

A number of quantitative measures will also be collected at the conclusion of the project:

- Number of people that participated in public engagement activities

- Number and diversity of organizations that participated in planning efforts (self-identifying)
- Number of individuals who participated in related discussions on the Council’s website, social media platforms, and online information-gathering sites
- Percentage of county, city and township governments whose staff and/or policymakers participated in planning efforts (when relevant to the effort)
- Earned media activities that occurred related to planning efforts (and comparisons, as available, when relevant)

In addition, outreach and engagement staff will work with residents of the region and representatives from different segments of the broader Twin Cities community to monitor the ongoing performance of the engagement practices of the Council. This may include, but is not limited to, convening focus groups, conducting surveys, convening independent review boards, and one-on-one interviews. These assessments will be presented to the full Metropolitan Council during quarterly outreach and engagement updates that are established to measure progress toward Council engagement goals.

Implementation

A full implementation plan, and set of tools for Council Members and staff, will be created to support this plan, and will evolve along with this plan as new lessons are learned and best practices are captured. Among those tools is a worksheet, developed collaboratively with community members, to guide planning and engagement staff in creating strategies and planning for project engagement. The Council will use its website to highlight best practices and encourage other organizations and communities to adopt these practices.

Conclusion

The Twin Cities region is a vibrant and diverse place. It is a collection of many different communities that together form one of the nation’s largest metropolitan areas. This region’s collective success is built on a strong civic tradition of shared action by residents, government, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, community groups, and business leaders aiming to enhance our communities and region as a whole. This shared tradition relies on an acknowledgment of each person and organization in our region as an asset and reflects a valid and important point of view. We believe that this Public Engagement Plan is a way for the Metropolitan Council to utilize all of the region’s valuable resources and to help assure we are creating shared values and aspirations for our communities.