



## **EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Rita Trapp, AICP  
Planner, HKGi

More than a box to check, community engagement is a strategic opportunity to build trust and develop advocates in achieving the community's vision. Effective community engagement, one that allows citizens a meaningful role in the planning process, can increase the likelihood that initiatives are widely accepted, and may even result in historic detractors becoming supporters. Community engagement participants not only gain a better understanding of the community and the complexities of local issues, but their participation enriches the planning process with in-depth and on-the-ground information. Community engagement is an ongoing process that starts immediately at project conception and should be developed considering the following:

- **Make a plan.** Begin the planning process by creating a community engagement plan that identifies who the process should engage; what information needs to be shared or learned; when it would be best to conduct the outreach; and what engagement method(s) are most effective. Be sure to revisit the plan at each stage of the process and adjust as needed based on the success of previous efforts and new information to evaluate.
- **Manage expectations.** Be realistic about what community engagement can accomplish with the identified budget or staff time. Recognize that the same technique or level of community engagement does not have to occur at each stage of the process or for each stakeholder group identified.
- **Be inclusive.** Use a variety of engagement techniques and publicize widely to ensure diverse perspectives are included. Explore opportunities to go where people are already meeting or gathering like community groups, local events/fairs, farmers markets, etc. Be sure to adjust the complexity of the engagement appropriately giving consideration to how information can be simplified and when targeted, rather than general, input is sufficient.
- **Remove barriers.** Consider ways to remove barriers to participation. This might include having online questionnaires or interactive websites, providing interpretation, meeting separately with a specific cultural group, providing transportation, or providing something for children to do while parents attend.
- **Be interactive.** Explore interactive engagement techniques such as:
  - Small group activities to brainstorm or rank issues, needs, or alternatives
  - Dot or dobber exercises where participants can vote for what they like or don't like
  - Preference surveys where attendees can select images or illustrations they prefer
  - Design exercises where attendees draw or use blocks/chips to identify preferred development patterns
  - Idea walls where participants can record their ideas about needs, potential solutions, or priorities
  - Polling through keypads or phones to respond to questions and provide immediate feedback
  - Bike or walking site tour with related exercises
- **Show value.** Demonstrate that participants' time and input is valued by showing how input has been incorporated and has influenced recommendations; starting and ending meetings on time; and managing participation so one voice or message does not overpower others'.

Community engagement for comprehensive planning can be difficult given its broad scale, 20-year timeframe, and technical complexity. It is worth the investment in time and resources; however, as it can lead to creative solutions and build local champions who can leverage their networks to implement plan initiatives.

