



# THE MOST COMMON CHALLENGES COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (AND HOW TO SOLVE THEM)

While public participation can be a powerful tool to empower the community and create shared authorship, it is often complex and challenging to pursue. Even with the best intentions, engagement efforts can fall short if they are not inclusive, well-resourced, or thoughtfully designed. The following are just a few of the most common challenges that project teams face when trying to execute public participation.

Learn more and access ready-to-use engagement tools in the Redevelopment Ready Communities engagement guide!





## LIMITED BUDGET

As it is, many communities find it hard to have enough resources to complete the work they have, let alone to execute complex public engagement processes. A lack of funds can limit the quality and breadth of the methods the project team can employ, while also adding to the responsibilities for team members.

### What We Hear from Project Teams

"I hardly have enough money to do the project. How can I possibly find money for outreach materials and renting an accessible venue for a community meeting?"

### The Solution:

Meaningful engagement does not need to be flashy or expensive. By prioritizing engagement tools that reflect your community's needs and goals, you'll create an authentic experience that optimizes your time and funds. By executing a few core, low-cost, high-return strategies well, it will build trust while you gather feedback that is directly applicable to the project. Strategies can include direct, quantitative measures, like a survey; digital communications and educational campaigns; or public meetings hosted online or in free community spaces.

You can explore expanding your budget by applying for local, state, or federal grants. Also, you can partner with local organizations for in-kind contributions for the elements needed in the process.

## NO TRUST

Earning trust is an essential part of any successful engagement process, and this can sometimes feel particularly challenging when the public enters into engagement already operating under a baseline assumption of distrust. A lack of trust from the start could cause the community to believe their input is irrelevant to the final decision.

*What We Hear from Communities*

"They didn't listen to us the last time, why will this time be any different?"



### Our Solution:

Trust is built by providing clear insight into the process. When starting your first engagement activity, create space for open and honest dialogue.

**Ask yourself WHO is the right person to deliver the message?** It might not always be local staff or elected officials.

Listen to the community's concerns and seek to empathetically share how you aim to address their needs. Precisely define which elements of the project are foundational aspects that need to remain, who will be reviewing input received from the community, and how that input will ultimately impact the final outcome.

**Once this has been clearly defined, make sure to follow through.**

Following through on commitments and feedback is one of the best tools for rebuilding and sustaining public trust and confidence.



## LIMITED TIME

Some projects have short timelines and accelerated deliverables, and it can feel challenging to allocate time for meaningful and authentic public participation. These rushed timelines can cause participation to be surface level, making it hard to absorb complex information and to genuinely incorporate feedback.

### What We Hear from Project Teams

"We need to have the public comment period completed by the end of the month, which means we only have two weeks to gather feedback and incorporate it into our final project deliverable."



### The Solution: Option 1

If you are at the start of forming your engagement strategy for a project, give yourself some extra time in the schedule to execute engagement in a meaningful and strategic way. Emphasize to partners and leadership the realities of engagement timelines – to execute, synthesize feedback, and implement into project work – and how they impact the project schedule.

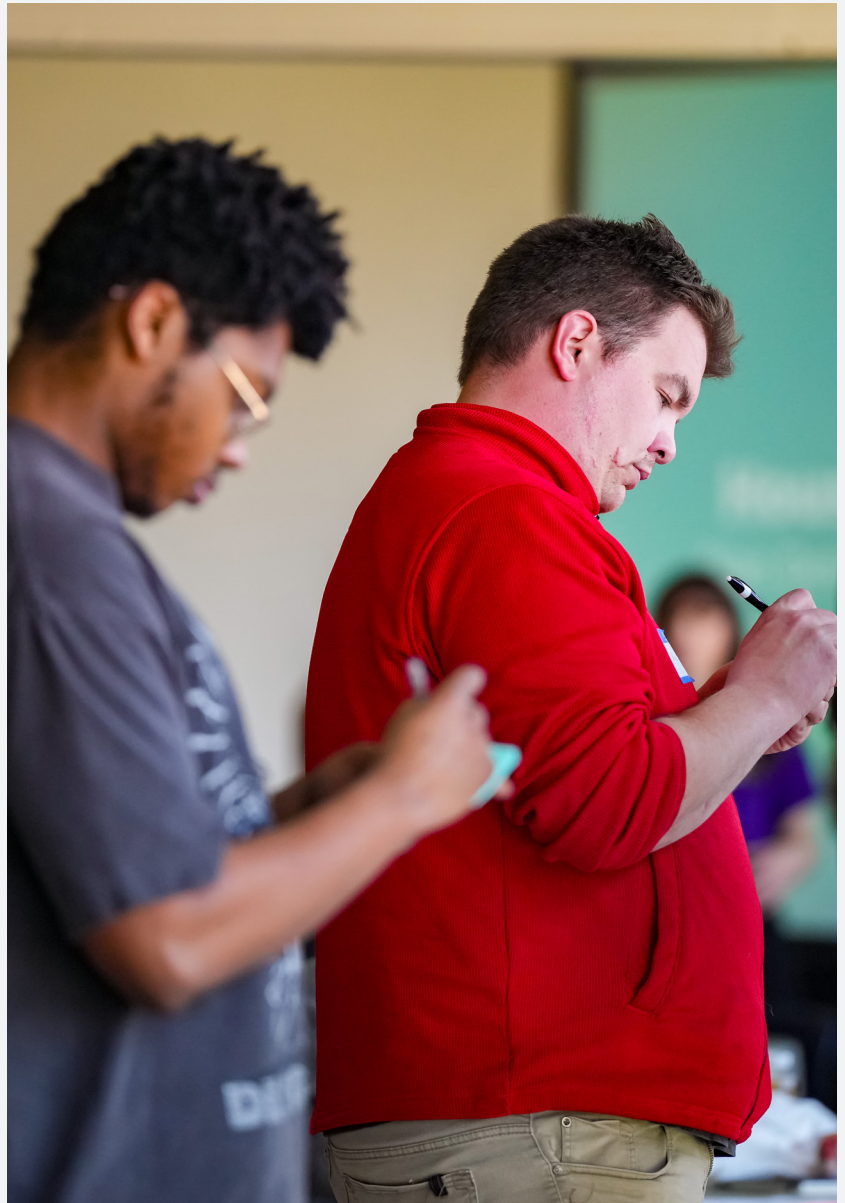
A few rules of thumb:

- **Public meetings need at least 3 weeks before the meeting date for getting the word out.** Consider adding another 3-6 weeks for public meeting preparation, advertisement, and execution depending on the time your team needs to draft, receive comments, edit, and print materials.
- In a study recently completed by Survey Monkey, *the majority of responses to surveys using an email collector were gathered in the first few days after email invitations were sent: 80% of responses were collected within 7 days* ([Survey Link](#)). Not including the time needed to build a survey and publish it, **you can count on needing to have a survey open for at least a week to gather strong participation.**

## Option 2:

If the project has already begun and you did not originally plan for enough time to complete engagement, you have a couple of options:

- First, discuss with your team and local leadership what the implications of extending the timeline are. Are you trying to meet a regulatory deadline for public comment that is immovable? Is council going on recess soon and you need project approval before that? Does your project funding have a deadline for use before you lose your remaining resources?
- If the deadline cannot be moved, take the opportunity to brainstorm strategies that engage the community in what is happening by keeping them informed. If you can, articulate one key moment for engagement with a few simple questions that can easily fold into the work and produce mutual understanding.
- If the deadline can be moved, give yourself more time. **This is ideal: rushing endangers meaningful dialogue.**



## LEADING THE WITNESS

Leading the witness refers to when a question is framed to stakeholders that subtly, (whether intentionally or unintentionally), directs them towards a particular answer. This can lead community members to feel like the decision has already been made and thus their feedback is irrelevant or that there is a lack of authenticity from the project team. Ultimately, when leading the witness happens, it limits the impact of the community's feedback and their faith that they are being meaningfully involved.

### What We Hear from Communities

"This is just for show. You have made your decision already without us, so what we say isn't important."



### Our Solution:

Revisit the goals you established early on when developing your public participation plan and ensure the questions you are asking reflect that purpose. While it is understandable that projects will have limitations and some project elements may not be able to change despite feedback received from the community, it is necessary to set those expectations early and often with participants. There is a difference between asking targeted questions that will garner the type of feedback a project team needs and asking questions that will undoubtedly push participants towards a preferred design alternative or planning decision.

## INTERPRETING YOUR FINDINGS

A key step in the participation process is transforming quantitative and qualitative feedback into meaningful dialogue. Whether from voting dots or survey responses, synthesizing this data into a clear, compelling narrative demonstrates that participants' input is valued and provides implementors with actionable guidance. This process should be transparent—explaining how data was aggregated and acknowledging limitations—while ensuring inclusivity by reflecting diverse voices, not just majority opinions.

### *Example of how to Phrase Priorities*

"The community feedback showed the most support for X, so that is where we are going to focus our attention first. Even if Y and Z were a close second and third."



### **Our Solution:**

Effective interpretation integrates qualitative and quantitative data to produce a comprehensive picture of what you heard and how you used the feedback.

First, develop a methodology for how you will analyze and synthesize the feedback you receive. Consider how you would like to disseminate common themes and values that emerge to the top.

Once you have crafted a methodology, develop an initial engagement summary and review it internally with a review committee, this could be a combination of your steering committee or project team members. Assess the summary for accuracy and that it comprehensively reflects what has been shared and does not misrepresent the participants' sentiments.

Once you've completed a quality review, prepare how you will present it to the public. Provide context for each summarized point with direct quotes from the public to illustrate what you heard and how it was interpreted. Allow it to be open for scrutiny and confirmation with the community that what you have documented in your summary accurately reflects the thoughts and ideas they shared.

Once you have established that the summary reflects what they shared, share how the responses will contribute to the decision-making process.

## GOOD ENGAGEMENT GETS YOU RESULTS

Effective engagement is both rewarding and challenging, delivering high returns when it aligns with community values. When community members are heard and actively involved in decision-making, they help identify challenges, shape solutions, and collaborate on achievable outcomes. This shared ownership fosters long-term commitment, empowering individuals to champion the final product through implementation and beyond.



*"We know enough about our community that we can probably do it ourselves without public input... and it'll be faster and simpler."*

Engaging with residents can sometimes feel like an unnecessary step, but without it people may feel unheard and resist change.

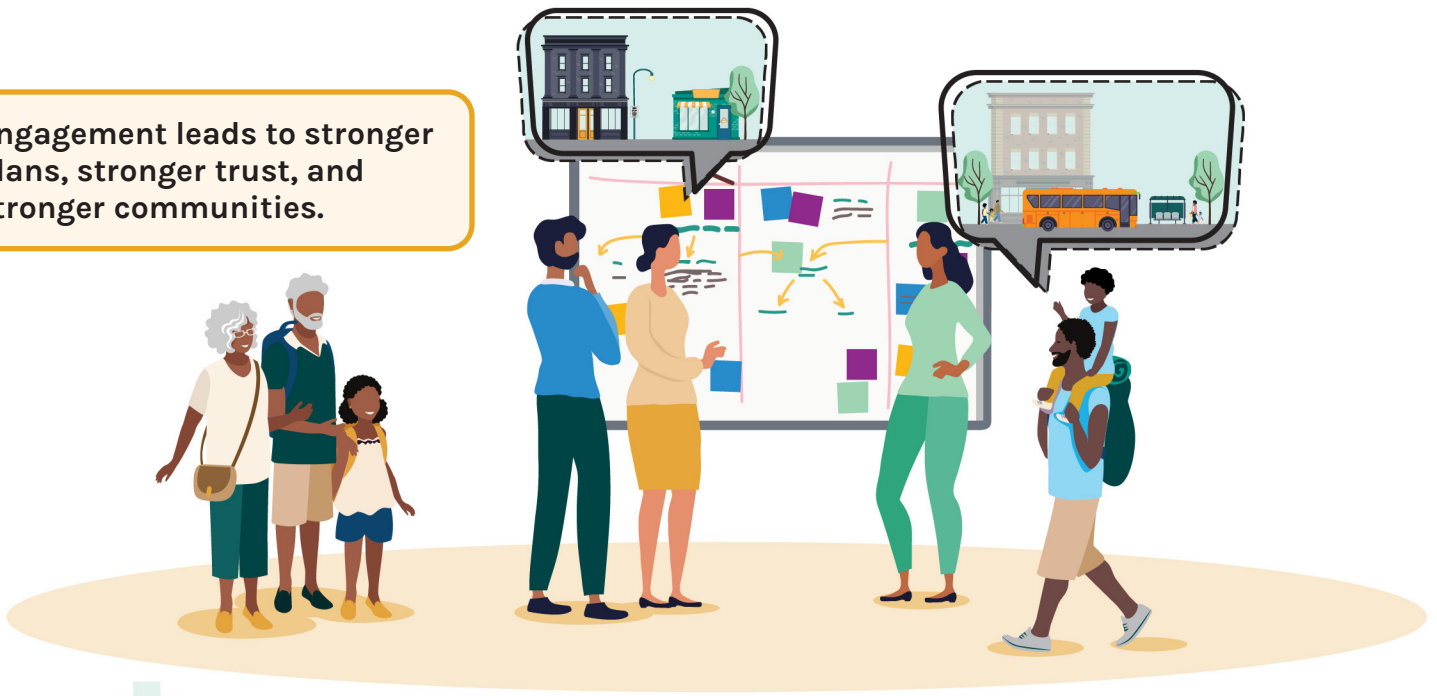
!!!  
*"All this development and construction is interfering with my daily life..."*

!!!  
*"We don't want this! Who approved this?"*

If it gets bad enough, this could make people with the means to leave go somewhere else.

!!!  
*"#\$!@&?!"*

Engagement leads to stronger plans, stronger trust, and stronger communities.



Community engagement is more than a box to check. It should help guide your work so community members buy into the process.

*"It seems like my voice was a meaningful part of what the city put here."*

*"Our community really needed this. I'm so happy the city listened to us."*

*I didn't want a bus stop here but I understand why the city did it.*

