



Gathering Stories



**MICHIGAN ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

What you will learn:

*Value of storytelling in
community engagement*

*How to effectively use
stories/storytelling in an
engagement process*

*How to use stories as a tool
for continuous community
engagement, long after
the plan/policy/code is
approved.*

Humans have always used stories as a means of communication and to share histories. Even in today's digital world, with decisively shorter communication patterns (280 maximum characters), storytelling continues to play a role - enabling us to express our emotions, connect and empathize with others, and learn from each other. The act of telling and gathering stories is an important planning tool. It is not a new tool to planners, who from the start have woven stories of a future to create plans, policies, and codes to support and evolve our communities. Stories have another role in planning, arguably one that is even more important: storytelling in community outreach and engagement work to empower a community leading to a more inclusive and democratic process.

TERMS

Community Engagement is a process of meaningful participation, collaboration, and dialogue between government and communities, where communities learn about, contribute to, and shape the decisions that affect their lives.

Storytelling describes the social and cultural activity of sharing stories, sometimes with improvisation, theatrics or embellishment. Every culture has its own stories or narratives, which are shared as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation to instill moral values.

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Resources:

Community Heart & Soul at www.communityheartandsoul.org

Discovering Community Values through Stories. Spring 2011

“Let Me Tell You a Story! Storytelling to Enhance Urban Planning Engagement” by James Rojas at Planetizen.com

Storytelling, a Model of and a Model for Planning by Merlijn van Hulst

Community stories reflect on the past and present, detailing an event, occurrence, or circumstance witnessed or experienced by the storyteller. A story is not a laundry list of facts or concerns. And though it reflects on the past and present, the storyteller is often conveying something about what the future should be.

Asking the community to share stories can be an ice breaker activity at an engagement event, can be the basis for a collaborative discussion and decision-making process, and can serve as an informational engagement tool to share progress and successes. Storytelling can make planning a more inclusive process; reframe difficult subjects; create a common starting point for discussions; create a common language for discussions replacing formal planning jargon; form relationships between participants and leaders; build trust; and serve as a vehicle for continuous community engagement and communication.

As John Moody wrote: “Stories puts someone else’s thoughts, experiences, and emotions in your head, which leads to sympathy/compassion for people with whom you previously shared nothing in common.” We create empathy and trust, which are critical for the planning process. -- James Rojas

How do Stories Support Community Engagement?

- Draw in more voices
- Create connections
- Builds empathy
- Reveals common values
- Lesson on consequences of actions
- Give hope for future
- Transform planning process

Like any planning tool, the telling and gathering of stories will only be effective if it is adapted to the community and activity. Before incorporating stories into your community engagement activity, consider the following:

Understand How the Stories Will be Used

What is the goal of this activity? Is it an ice breaker or starter activity to make participants feel more comfortable? Will it be the basis for a future discussion or action? Will it be used to inform others? The intent should be shared with the participants.

Give Guidance

If the intent is to build discussions from the stories or create a common starting point, give clear guidance on the topic to which you want the participants to speak.

Know Your Audience

Who is participating (or who should be)? Do you have the right environment to make someone feel comfortable to share a story? Would the participants do better in a one on one setting, small group, a large stage, a story booth, or perhaps with a video submission?

Rely on Partners. Who else is working in this community? Build on the work and discussions already started by community partners.

Create Safe Spaces for Sharing. Will everyone feel comfortable sharing in the location or on the platform selected? Be clear that it is a judgment free zone.

Create Varied Spaces for Sharing. Not everyone will want to, or be physically able to, share their story orally or in front of an audience. Include other opportunities for sharing, including written, artwork, or digital format.

No Response Required. It is human nature to want to respond when someone shares something personal; we don't like silence and often are formulating a response before the speaker is finished. Let participants know that beyond a "thank you for sharing", additional responses are not mandatory, but good listening is requested.

Stories can accomplish what no other form of communication can – they can get through to our hearts with a message. In our world of information transfer, data exchange and media impressions, where we have become calloused by so much communication, stories have the power to speak to us about what truly matters. – Will Rogers, The Story Handbook

Outside of an engagement process, community stories and those told by the municipal staff can be an important regular activity. Effective and compelling storytelling can help planners reframe planning to deal with highly sensitive urban issues in a competitive media landscape. Using stories this way allows for continuous engagement, which is important to maintain community trust and relationships and keeps the community informed, especially when there are gaps in time between when a project is envisioned and its actual implementation. Stories can illustrate success and progress after a project is completed or a plan is approved, as well as explain any challenges or delays to implementation.

Stories can be collected in a variety of ways and many of the same principles for other engagement activities apply for gathering them.

To be most effective in using stories for this purpose, there should be a common place where the stories are posted, a schedule for adding stories, with responsibility for doing so assigned to government staff.

Post Stories to a Common Location. Create a clearinghouse for outreach and project information, whether it is a web site or a physical site. Make it active with the regular posting of stories and with activities to draw viewers, such as questions, response boxes, and surveys. Use social media, email lists, annual newsletters, or other regular communications to direct viewers to the site.

Create a Schedule or Calendar. Set a calendar of topics, or a schedule for posting new stories to keep the site active and of interest, allowing it to regularly attract the attention of viewers. Pair the topics with local events or holidays, like Earth Day or Bike to Work Week.

...use of storytelling as a tool would normally reveal a commitment to more inclusive, community-focused forms of planning and less to bureaucratic, hierarchical forms that probably still form the bulk of instances of planning – Merlijn van Hulst

Staff Time. A dedicated staff, at least part time, will ensure this happens regularly. This person would be responsible for reaching out to the community and neighborhood leaders to solicit stories or conduct interviews that can be formed into a story.

What stories does your community have to share?

WHAT COMMUNITIES ARE DOING THIS?

Many communities have storytelling groups, including Ann Arbor, Birmingham, Detroit, Grand Rapids, Lansing, Muskegon, New Baltimore, and Warren.

Find them at www.michiganstorytelling.org.

This tear sheet was developed by the Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) for the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC). The Michigan Association of Planning is a 501 c 3 organization, dedicated to promoting sound community planning that benefits the residents of Michigan. MAP was established in 1945 to achieve a desired quality of life through comprehensive community planning that includes opportunities for a variety of lifestyles and housing, employment, commercial activities, and cultural and recreational amenities.

