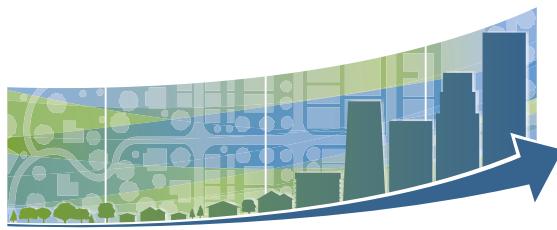# SIX-STEP GUIDE TO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

An outline for how a community may organize
its public participation strategy

MICHIGAN ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

The public participation strategy for the community shall be used to identify effective/proactive engagement tools that will increase accountability and transparency, requiring a municipality to often seek public input as well as record and share the results of the various methods. This should serve as a "communication toolbox" for the community to use on methods that prove most effective. The document is updated to reflect success and areas in need of improvement, leaving a strong culture of public involvement, despite municipal turnover.

This strategy could be incorporated into a commissioner/board training packet, new employee handbook, or incorporated into the community's overall communication guidelines.

Redevelopment Ready Communities® (RRC), administered by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) embraces clear policies and procedures. Part of obtaining certification is to have a public participation strategy in active use. The following information acts as a general outline for how a community may organize its public participation strategy. Each section contains a brief explanation for the purpose of that section and a few examples or ideas to consider. **This document can also serve as a means to meet requirements for other programs administered by the MEDC.**

The material in this strategy is advisory and does not constitute official MEDC policy or guidance. A community should look beyond the outline provided to meet the needs of their community.

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The following is a recommended framework of how a public participation strategy should be outlined:

I. Purpose of Strategy: How to use this public participation strategy

II. State Regulations

III. Key Stakeholders

IV. Communication Toolbox
   a. Identify target audiences/key stakeholders
      i. Create a message that is tailored to meet each target audience and key stakeholder interests
   b. Identify needs/interests of each target audience/key stakeholder
      i. Deliver message using multiple communication methods to reach each target audience/key stakeholder
   c. Identify the right approach
      i. Identify 2–3 methods of communication depending on the project being worked on

V. Communicating Results

VI. Evaluating Success
   a. Determine appropriate frequency to communicate to each stakeholder using each communication method

RESOURCES

The following resources are two public participation frameworks that your community can use to build, execute, and implement successful public engagement:
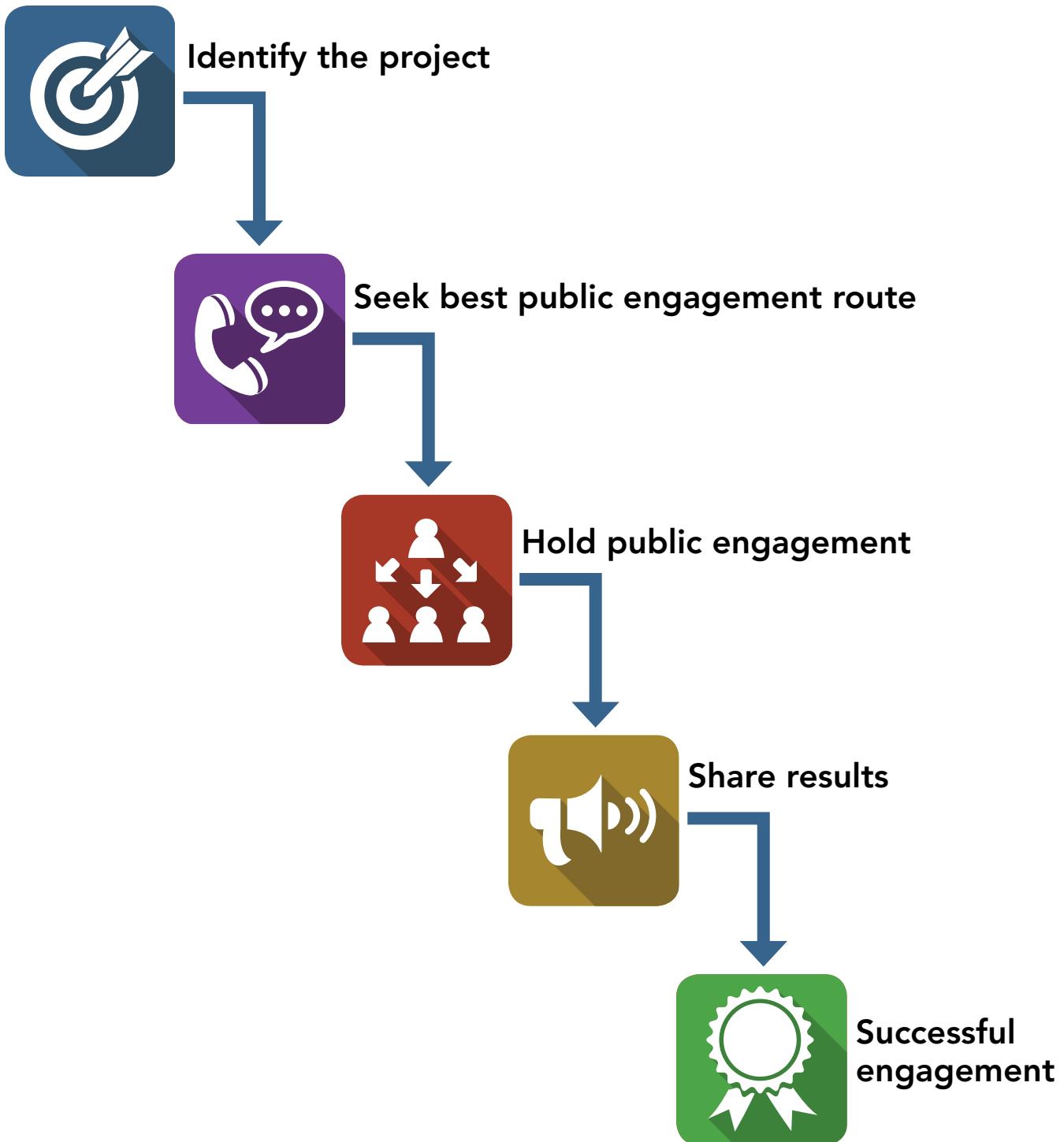
- **Orton Family Foundation: Community Heart and Soul:**
  www.orton.org/build-your-community/community-heart-soul

- **AARP Livability Collection** ("Community Listening Session Tool Kit" is recommend):
  www.aarp.org/livable-communities/tool-kits-resources/info-2017/roadmap-to-livability-collection.html

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Citizen Plan additional requirements
- While the guide provides best practices that encompasses criteria required for CDBG, there are additional requirements that should be outlined in the plan. The following link provides you to those requirements: *www.miplace.org/4a26ff/globalassets/documents/cdbg/gam/chapter-11/reading/11-citizenparticipation-and-other-requirements*

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Identify the project

Seek best public engagement route

Hold public engagement

Share results

Successful engagement

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The strategy should include a section that describes what the municipality seeks to accomplish through the creation of the strategy. What types of measurable goals can be incorporated that will measure the success of public participation. This allows all involved in the creation of the document to come to consensus on what successful public participation looks like. The following are examples of goals and objectives that should be incorporated that meets the needs of the community:

• **Solicit public participation in each phase of the master planning process.** Throughout the multiple phases of the master planning process, extensive participation components are and will continue to be incorporated to foster public participation. Proactive participation denotes early and continuous involvement in important policy or project decisions before they are finalized. There are many opportunities for the public to play a role in shaping short- and long-term needs, solutions and funding priorities. The earlier the public is involved in the process, the greater the opportunity to influence important land-use decisions.

• **Seek broad identification and representative involvement of all residents of the community.** The diverse characteristics and needs of residents require different communication and outreach techniques.

• **Utilize effective and equitable avenues for distributing information and receiving comments.** There are many techniques and mechanisms available to ensure that a diverse public is well-informed and able to play a role in the planning process. Recognizing that no single technique or mechanism will work in all cases, it is up to the municipality to consider the special communication needs of the public and use the best approaches to accomplish this objective.

• **Provide educational materials and design participation initiatives that will support and encourage effective participation.** Effective participation in the decision-making process requires an understanding of land-use issues and the framework for making local investment decisions. Planning professionals and officials need to be well-versed in and employ visualization techniques that optimize public understanding of issues and concepts. Visualization techniques can be especially helpful with specific sites or areas of redevelopment.

• **Maintain and develop staff expertise in all aspects of participation.** This includes techniques for bridging language, cultural and economic differences that affect participation; ways to convey issues and information in meaningful ways to various cultural groups; and means for ensuring equitable representation for all segments of the population and sectors of the economy.

• **Make documents from events accessible.** This is key when it comes to transparency. Having results, notes, minutes or videos of events that took place should be made easily accessible.

• **Support and encourage continuous improvement in the methods used to meet the public need for information and involvement.** Public information and involvement methods are continually evolving. The municipality is committed to seeking new and innovative ways to engage and keep the public involved throughout the process.

• **Record results of public engagement and recount these results back to the public.** To properly capture the concerns, priorities and vision of the public, the municipality will develop a system to track the various techniques and mechanisms of public input. To maintain transparency and consistency, the municipality will develop a method for sharing public participation with the public.

• **Measuring success of public engagement.** Creating measurable outcomes where possible and tying those to the evaluation section of the public participation strategy. This will help determine the best and most effective outreach a community may provide without exhausting available resources.

• **Assist applicants.** Providing the ability assist an applicant to seek public input when needed.

The strategy should include laws concerning public participation to establish the bare-minimum public participation requirements. The following is sample language:

Along with the desire to include a diversified public in its planning processes, the municipality relies on state statutes to help guide its participation activities.

Michigan Open Meetings Act

In accordance with the Michigan Open Meetings Act (PA 267 of 1976), the municipality will hold meetings in the *X* building located at *address,* which is accessible to the general public.

The public will be notified within 10 days of the first meeting of a public body in each calendar or fiscal year; the body will publicly post a list stating the dates, times and places of all its regular meetings at its principle office. (If a public body does not have a principle office, the notice would be posted in the office of the county clerk for a local public body or the office of the Secretary of State for a state public body.)

If there is a change in schedule, within three days of the meeting in which the change is made, the public body will post a notice stating the new dates, times and places of regular meetings.

For special and irregular meetings, public bodies will post a notice indicating the date, time and place at least 18 hours before the meetings.

Note: A regular meeting of a public body which is recessed for more than 36 hours, can only be reconvened if a notice is posted 18 hours in advance.

Public bodies will hold emergency sessions without a written notice or time constraints if the public health, safety or welfare is severely threatened and if two-thirds of the body's members vote to hold the emergency meeting.

Any citizen can request that public bodies put them on a mailing list so that they are notified in advance of all meetings, by contacting the following: *xxxx*

Michigan Planning Enabling Act

In accordance with the Michigan Planning Enabling Act (PA 33 of 2008) the following parties will be notified via first class mail, personal delivery or electronic mail by the planning commission (or legislative body if no planning commission exists) of the intent to plan and request the recipient's cooperation and comment:

- The county in which the municipality is located
- The regional planning commission for the region in which the municipality is located, if there is no county planning commission for the county in which that municipality is located. If there is a county planning commission, the municipal planning commission may consult with the regional planning commission but is not required to do so
- The county planning commission, or if there is no county planning commission, the county board of commissioners for the county in which that municipality is located
- Each public utility company, railroad company, and public transportation agency owning or operating a public utility, railroad, or public transportation system within the local unit of government, and any government entity that registers its name and mailing address for this purpose with the planning commission
- If the master plan will include a master street plan, the county road commission and the state transportation department

After the draft master plan has been submitted to the legislative body for review and approval for distribution, the draft plan will be submitted to the previously listed entities for review.

Before approving a proposed master plan, a planning commission will hold not less than one public hearing on the proposed master plan. The hearing will be held after the expiration of the deadline for comment as outlined in the Act.

The planning commission will give notice of the time and place of the public hearing not less than 15 days before the hearing by publication in a newspaper of general circulation within the local unit of government. The planning commission will also submit notice of the public hearing by first class mail, personal delivery or electronic mail to the previously listed entities for review.

After the adoption of the master plan, a planning commission may publish and distribute copies of the master plan or of any report, and employ other means of publicity and education.

Don't forget to include local laws.

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The strategy should identify important groups that can assist and enhance the public participation process, as well as identify groups that are not often at the visioning table. This section can describe the role that groups have played in the past and opportunities for them to participate in the future. The creation of the strategy is an advantageous time to identify contacts within organizations or groups and solidify partnerships in the public participation process.

The following are often important entities:
- Local officials
- Business associations
- Disability organizations
- Low-moderate income persons
- Chamber of Commerce
- Commercial business owners

- Community's largest employers
- Downtown Development Authority (DDA), Principal Shopping District (PSD) or Business Improvement Zone (BIZ)
- Local brokers
- Neighborhood groups
- Neighboring municipalities
- Potential investors
- Public employees (police, fire, health, education)
- Real estate professionals
- Religious groups
- Senior groups
- Social organizations
- Students
- Young professionals
- Main Street organization
- Multi-lingual services
- Newspapers
- Other entities familiar with the community

Strong stakeholder partnerships generate value

- LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS
- INVESTORS
- MUNICIPALITY
- ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS
- COMMUNITY

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Developing a matrix to identify the best approaches to public engagement. Throughout the guide, various strategies have been identified, along with communication toolboxes. The table below can be used to identify the most optimal approach when seeking public input.

COMMUNICATION TOOLBOX

	Master Plan	Zoning Amendments	Environmental Projects	CIP Planning	Parks and Recreation Planning	Major Developments
Pre-application meetings						Recommended
Surveys	Recommended	Optional	Recommended	Recommended	Recommended	
Open house meetings and communication workshops	Recommended	Optional	Recommended	Recommended	Recommended	Optional
Charrettes/design workshops	Optional				Optional	Optional
Walking tours	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional
One-on-one interviews	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional
Focus groups	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional
Digital tools of communication	Recommended	Optional	Recommended	Optional	Recommended	Recommended
Local events (church, farmers market, school)	Recommended	Recommended			Recommended	Optional
News, media	Optional	Recommended		Recommended	Optional	Recommended
Public hearing	Required	Required	Required	Required	Required	Required

RECOMMENDED   **OPTIONAL**   **REQUIRED**

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The public participation toolbox is virtually limitless, from tried and true methods, to the truly imaginative. This section is where a municipality can describe the positive and negative aspects of ways the public is already being reached and brainstorm new ways to engage stakeholders. The following situations are where the methods identified in the toolbox can be used:

- Master plan update
- Zoning ordinance update
- Downtown development plan
- Corridor improvement plan
- Parks and recreation plan
- Low controversy development project
- High controversy development project
- Community Development Block Grant projects
- Environmental clearances

It is critical that a community decide what is the best way to seek input on any of the items identified in the strategies for outreach.

The following are sample methods for community involvement:

Basic Announcement Methods for Public Meetings

The following methods are often used to advertise public meetings. Many times, this does not result in involvement of all stakeholders, especially those with visual impairments, non-English speakers, the illiterate, youth, citizens with limited mobility and those who work during the time of the public meeting.

- Newspaper posting
- Website posting
- Flier posting (community hall, churches, workplaces, community centers, social clubs, local coffee shops)
- Announcements at council meeting
- Post card mailings
- Attachments to water bills
- Local cable notification
- Braille postings (accommodate ADA requirements)

Collaborative Proactive Practices

The following are some example public participation methods that are less reactive and more focused on education and collaborative visioning.

Many of these methods would not be possible without strong partnerships with stakeholders identified earlier in the strategy and a community that is committed to public input.

- **Surveys:** Surveys are useful for identifying specific areas of interest or concentration from a broad scope of ideas or issues. These areas of interest can then be further explored using other methods like the ones outlined below. A community may use a survey to identify where to start in the planning process, or the general climate surrounding a topic. Surveys can be useful to get a general idea of something, but should not be used as the sole method of public input. It is helpful for a municipality to administer surveys with partners. For example, schools can send surveys home with children, churches can have them available to fill out and neighborhood groups can put them in mail boxes. As with most public input efforts, it is best to vary the delivery method (mailed, handed out, electronic) and include bilingual language if applicable in your community.

- **Community workshops:** These could be as simple as a series of question and answer sessions or as creative as creating a board game. The strategy should identify potential venues, considering access for the disabled and citizens without vehicles. In addition, the strategy should identify how to reach underrepresented groups. For example, holding workshops in different languages to suit your community's demographic and at different locations and times. This section is an ideal place to identify who would facilitate the workshops; whether it is an outside consultant, active citizen or municipal staff. Often workshops are a great way to educate the community surrounding a specific topic and hear concerns, questions and ideas.

- **Charrettes:** The charrette differs from a workshop because it is a multi-day event where designers and planners work on a plan in-between what are called "feedback loops." Usually between three and seven days, citizens can come to the "charrette studio," which is an office on or near the location of the proposed plan or project. Citizens offer ideas while the charrette team facilitates and observes. From these suggestions, the designers and planners change the plan to suit community input and present their creation the next day where the community offers feedback again. This

makes up one cycle of a "feedback loop." There can be up to five feedback loops, resulting in a final plan shortly thereafter. This process can be completed with many different budgets, depending on the expertise of municipal staff and local residents. Charrettes take much planning beforehand. The strategy offers an opportunity to begin planning for how a community would hold a charrette and who would be involved. For more information, visit www.charretteinstitute.org.

- **Walk-abouts:** Walk-abouts offer candid feedback from a variety of stakeholders when discussing a specific area. They can be paired with community workshops or charrettes to measure the perceived safety and comfort of pedestrians in a downtown, neighborhood or corridor. Walk-abouts are also useful for identifying desired design, problem properties or safety concerns. The strategy should identify how citizens will be notified of a walk-about, keeping in mind the limitations of just one notification method. In addition, the strategy should determine if community partners and staff can facilitate the sessions, or if a consultant will be necessary.
- **One-on-one interviews:** Interviews are a great way to get specifics on a topic. In the stakeholder section of the strategy, specific community leaders may have been identified, making them ideal candidates for an interview. Some communities have individuals that are very vocal about issues in the community. Interviewing them may give some perspective on how to address their concerns. It is important to remember that one interview reflects the opinion of one individual and should not be considered the standing of the entire community.
- **Focus groups:** Like interviews, focus groups can help to narrow down concepts or get a specific side of the story. Stakeholders groups identified earlier in strategy make ideal participants of a focus group.
- **Standing committees:** These are focus groups that repeatedly meet and will differ depending on the needs of a community. They are perfect for concerned residents, underrepresented groups, or groups that may have specific needs in a community, such as students or seniors. This is an opportunity for a municipality to draw from the expertise of residents, perhaps organizing a standing committee of real estate professionals, business owners and brokers to offer feedback.

- **Social networking:** Technology offers a unique opportunity to give and receive information to a mass of people. Municipalities can post events, share information and even solicit feedback. This public participation method is best used in conjunction with other methods because it excludes those who do not use social media. The strategy should identify the social media venues a community will use, the target audience of these venues and who will be responsible for making posts and monitoring the posts of others. The ability to spread misinformation or post disrespectful comments makes it important to plan for the use of social media.

Inclusive Practices

The following are some examples of making sure that everyone is involved in providing input.

- **Inclusivity:** Seeking out or offering targeted sessions with translators to seek input from groups rarely seen at the table or who don't have the ability to speak up due to language barriers. Offer services such as sign language, translators and more.
- **Workshops on the go:** Offer the opportunity to host a workshop at a local event, or locations which is convenient for members of the community who don't have access to transportations or have disability limitation. Attend existing community events.
- **People First Language:** Incorporating "people first" language is used to speak appropriately and respectfully with and about people with disabilities. "People first" language emphasizes the person first and not the disability, by starting the phrase with the words "person who" or "person with."
  - » www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/ disabilityposter_photos.pdf
- **Encouragement of resident participation:**
  - » Low- and moderate-income persons
  - » Consulting with public and private agencies
  - » Consultation with public housing agencies
  - » Public housing residents
- **Accommodation: Providing tools and resources to accommodative a persons with a disability:**
  - » ADA accessible
  - » Auxiliary aids

This section should outline how results from public participation sessions will be communicated back to the public. This demonstrates that the responses were heard, and creates an environment of transparency.

Municipalities have many venues of communication: television, newsletters, the municipal website, social media. The appropriate venue to communicate, identify who is responsible for this communication and how soon after the public participation event are all described in this section. There is no one way of communicating. **The community should choose venues that make sense for that community. The following are examples of ways to communicate public feedback:**

- **Public meetings:** The meetings will be televised on station. Also, person will post meeting minutes online no later than amount of time after the meeting is held.
- **Surveys:** Surveys will be compiled by person no later than amount of time after the survey was completed. The results will be posted online and published in the quarterly newsletter.
- **Community workshops/charrettes:** Person is charged with taking notes during community workshops and charrettes. These notes will be posted on the workshop/charrette Facebook page no later than amount of time after the workshop or the charrette. In addition, the results of these events will be communicated in a wrap up community meeting. Additional information can be incorporated into the appendix of adopted plans.
- **Walk-abouts:** The facilitator(s) of will walk-abouts will take notes during the walk-about. These results will be compiled by person and posted online no later than amount of time after the walk-about.
- **One-on-one interviews:** Interview results will be kept confidential for the comfort of the participants unless requested otherwise.
- **Focus groups:** Focus group results will be kept confidential for the comfort of the participants unless requested otherwise.
- **Standing committees:** Meeting minutes will be taken by person and posted online no later than amount of time after the standing meeting occurs.
- **Social networking:** Person is responsible for monitoring the municipal Facebook page. They will respond to public posts no later than amount of time after the post was made. Person will tweet on behalf of the municipality concerning community events and public participation results.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Participation Efforts

A community should identify who records all public participation efforts. In this section, the community should identify how the strategy will be updated depending on the success of the various outreach methods. In addition, it may outline an exit survey for certain public participation events. Furthermore, this section will identify when the strategy will be reviewed again. This will result in public participation that is continuously evolving to better obtain public input.

CDBG

A good practice to address complaints is to provide citizens the address, phone number, and times for submitting complaints and provide timely written answers to written complaints within 15 working days where practicable.

A community may chose to develop its own metrics in order to define the success of each public participation method. The development of a survey is a perfect way to identify the success of an event.

Sample Survey

COMMUNITY EVENT SATISFACTION SURVEY
Event:
Did you enjoy this event?
Would you come to a future event?
How could we improve?

If you have difficulty retrieving surveys for public input, think of unique innovative ways to determine the success of an event, such as:

- Listening sessions
- Ballot voting
- Focus groups
- Interviews with participants
- Community indicators

Annual review of Public Participation Strategy

Sample language that could be included in strategies:

"This document is intended to be a living document that can adapt to changes in technology and best meet the needs of residents. Therefore, this strategy is reviewed annually and updated as necessary. Methods that have failed will not be removed but will be reviewed and documented so that the same mistakes will not be made in the future. The results will identify strengths and weaknesses and allow staff to maximize outreach methods. This feedback loop will create a continuous review process that enables officials to make improvements to strategy."

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Public participation, when properly executed, builds community consensus and strengthens sense of place. Creating a culture of collaborative visioning enriches democracy by allowing citizens to voice their ideas, not just their complaints. A community's public participation strategy is not another document to be created and shelved, but a daily guide for how to best incorporate the public into decisions that affect their space. The community should end the strategy by stating again why the document was created and making a commitment to its use. Both elected/appointed officials and municipal staff should participate in the creation and application of the strategy. The result will be development that the whole community has planned for, smoother approval processes and a more satisfied public.

HELPFUL HINTS FROM AARP

Involve all generations
Vibrant communities are places where young people and older adults are included in all aspects of community life. That includes being involved in making the changes they want to see in their community.

Ensure diversity
People of all income levels share the benefits of safe, affordable, accessible housing and transportation options. People of all ethnicities, races and cultures share the benefits of accessible, inviting parks and green spaces. People of all gender identifications and sexual orientations enjoy the benefits to health and well-being of having access to quality health services and community supports. When people don't know about community projects or when they don't feel welcome, they likely won't benefit. If people who are traditionally excluded from community involvement are involved with the effort—especially the implementation effort—it will encourage other members of often excluded communities to participate in the work.

Roadblocks
When a problem pops up, figure out what happened. Look to your stake holders and people who have experience dealing with a similar project. Gather the best messages and information about the initiative, the need for it, and the benefit to the community of completing it. Then work on getting positive media attention and community support. If the obstacle is insurmountable, revisit the initiative's vision, mission and goals and think about other ways to meet the goals and objectives. Efforts to make a community truly livable and great for people of all ages can take years. Maintaining such livability—and improving upon it—is an ongoing endeavor. Occasionally, the stars will align and there will be a smooth path to implementation. Struggles and challenges are often the norm.