Engaging the community in the development of a local housing strategy

Why should local officials engage the community in the development of the housing strategy?

Building a local housing strategy with a strong community engagement process can help to:

- Create a **stronger strategy**. Community members have information city staff may not know, and listening to community perspectives, concerns, and recommendations can unearth issues and reveal strategies that better meet a city’s housing needs.
- Build a political coalition to ensure that the strategy is **implemented** by elected officials.
- Build **buy-in** for the housing strategy and can help reduce **long-term costs and avoid delays**, political opposition, and litigation.
- Enhance **trust in government**, especially in communities that have been marginalized from decision-making, and strengthen **relationships between city government and community groups** for future planning processes.
- Lead to **better understanding**. Engagement can help officials better understand community concerns and help the community better understand the government’s constraints, such as state legal prohibitions, past litigation, or political feasibility, and how decision-makers weighed different community needs and came to a decision.
- Support community **capacity to advance implementation of the housing strategy** and to engage in the next planning process.
- Help to satisfy **federal, state, or local legal obligations** to engage the community.

“I firmly believe that our community engagement process greatly contributed to the successful development of our AFH [Assessment of Fair Housing] plan. We got data and information from residents, advocates, and non-profit agencies that we would not have otherwise been able to get. More importantly, the personal stories about their own housing injustices informed and shaped our thinking about goals and strategies needed to achieve success.” – Senior Housing & Community Development Official
“The participation of Pittsburgh United, representing a coalition of labor, environment, faith-based, and community voices, on the Mayor’s Affordable Housing Task Force was invaluable and led to positive outcomes that may not otherwise have occurred. Centering community voices revealed the need for more than just direct subsidy, but for “soft” activities such as legal representation to address tangled title and tenants’ rights education and organizing, as well as non-traditional, community-ownership approaches such as investment in Community Land Trusts. Including representatives of impacted populations at these planning tables is critical to equitable outcomes, but it is also critical that these voices remain at the table throughout the policymaking and implementation process.” – Former Senior Government Official

What are the steps to designing meaningful community engagement?

**Define scope of the planning process**

Being clear about the scope of the housing strategy process will make it easier to engage the community in a transparent and accountable way.

- What are the goals of the process? Is the city starting from a relatively blank slate to understand the full set of housing needs or is it focused on specific policy ideas?
- What is the timeline and decision-making structure that will dictate the process?

**Develop an understanding of the community landscape**

Staff designing the process should map out who the city needs to reach and hear, keeping in mind that the “usual suspects” who have a presence in local decision-making do not represent the full set of community voices.

- Who is most affected by the housing, land use, and other issues at stake, considering specific neighborhoods as well as racial, ethnic, income, religious, or other groups? [Learn more about neighborhood disparities.](#)
- Which community organizations (community organizing groups, service providers, faith institutions, or others) are trusted by community members and can help to engage the most affected community members outlined above?
- Who are the other stakeholders (housing and non-housing practitioners, industry representatives, advocates, other governmental agencies) that bring important perspectives, concerns, and expertise to the housing planning process? [Learn more about interagency collaboration.](#)

**Identify core questions and trade-offs**
The community engagement process is a chance to get the community’s help answering the tough questions with which local officials must grapple. While it might seem daunting to put controversial questions before the community, these questions will emerge and it is best for a smooth process and certainty in the development process to be frank about them from the start.

- What are the most important questions and trade-offs the city must consider?
- Are there segments of the community that will be particularly interested in those questions?

**Assess government capacity**
Community engagement may require new skills or new resources. Cities may want to train staff, retain consultants, and partner with community groups.

- Is the staff comfortable reaching out to and listening to community members?
- Could the city use a consultant to help design or facilitate the process?
- Can community-based groups help to build bridges to the community?
- Could city staff use trainings on racial disparities or other topics to help understand community concerns?

**Assess community capacity**
The community may also need new skills to provide informed feedback.

- What kind of trainings or materials will community members need to engage in an informed and productive way?

**Design engagement strategies and identify resource needs**
There are a range of engagement strategies to consider depending on the scope of the planning process, the community landscape, the capacities of government and the community, the questions that need to be answered, and the resources available.

- Have some strategies worked better than others in the community in the past?
- Is there political support and community interest in a sustained, structured advisory committee or taskforce to guide the process and develop policy recommendations?
- Given the community assessment above, what other community perspectives should be brought in through broader outreach and what are the best community-based meetings and outreach strategies for reaching them?
- Could web-based engagement tools help to engage people who cannot attend in person meetings?
- What resources are needed to implement the most effective strategies?

**Decide how input will be used**
To build community buy-in, it is important to be clear with the community about how the city plans to use feedback from a taskforce, public meetings, online surveys, and any other engagement, and to follow through on those commitments.

- How will community input be used?
- How will the city share and discuss with the public which community recommendations were used and which were not and why not?

**Inform public about next steps through implementation**

With buy-in on the strategy and strengthened capacity to engage, the community can help to see the plan through to successful implementation.

- What barriers to implementation are likely to arise?
- How can the community support implementation of the plan?
- What are the concrete next steps for community to engage through implementation?

**What engagement strategies have other cities successfully employed?**

The strategies below were identified by local government officials, community members, housing practitioners, community organizers, and advocates in select cities and regions that recently engaged in community engagement processes.

1. **Community stakeholder taskforce**

A strong starting place for community engagement around a housing strategy process is establishing an advisory committee or taskforce to develop a shared analysis of the problems and to guide the process to solutions. Such a taskforce should have diverse representation of the stakeholders and community interests and serve as a consistent, facilitated forum for dialogue, debate, and decision-making about housing solutions. (Depending on the local circumstances, a community stakeholder taskforce could be separate from an interagency taskforce of government representatives, or they could be combined.) [Learn more about interagency collaboration.](#)

**Taskforce’s responsibilities and charge:** In some places a taskforce of community representatives and other stakeholders is used to oversee the entire process, including the development of broader engagement strategies and the drafting of the housing plan, while in other places the charge of the taskforce is to vet specific policy questions. Depending on the charge, the taskforce might work in smaller subcommittees on particular issues and then come back and report to the full group. It is important to be clear with the taskforce members about their responsibilities, how their recommendations will be used, and the timeline for their work.
Membership of the taskforce: The process of selecting who sits on such a taskforce should balance the practical importance of keeping the taskforce size manageable and representation consistent, with the principles of engaging the most affected communities, valuing community perspectives, and addressing power dynamics.

In most places, such a taskforce includes 20 or fewer individuals, including elected officials and agency staff from a range of perspectives as well as housing practitioners and industry stakeholders, non-housing (e.g., education, environmental, transportation) practitioners and advocates, and community representatives. A landscape review of those most affected by the housing strategies, community groups, and other stakeholders can help identify the voices that should be at the taskforce table.

Cities with city-wide coalitions of community advocates, like City of Pittsburgh Affordable Housing Task Force, Oakland At Home, and Seattle’s Progressive Revenue Taskforce on Housing & Homelessness, have leveraged those organized groups to bring community voices to the table. Not all cities have this kind of organized community-based network. Further, even in places that have the benefit of coalitions or networks that represent multiple community and advocacy groups, officials and advocates noted the importance of including several different community, grassroots, and tenants groups in the taskforce to ensure community representation at the table and community ownership over the policy recommendations. One community advocate recommended allowing for public nominations for the taskforce so there is transparency and public input into the representation on the taskforce. In New Orleans, the HousingNOLA process included community voices on the taskforce by setting up a separate community review committee made up of community volunteers, which had a veto over the recommendations of the HousingNOLA policy taskforce.

Developing a shared analysis: Discussions with officials and participants revealed the importance of ensuring that the taskforce’s discussions and decisions are informed by high-quality data analysis that provides an assessment of market conditions, housing needs, and gaps, as well as broader community input, so the discussions of solutions are grounded in a common analysis of the local challenges and needs.

In many places, local governments and/or philanthropy also invest in trainings or advisors on technical housing issues as well as racial and social justice education to help to level the playing field and help both community and government taskforce members engage in a more informed manner.

Facilitation: Successful taskforces also are skillfully facilitated by neutral and trusted intermediaries. Facilitators noted several specific strategies to guide the taskforce –
making sure everyone develops and agrees to the ground rules and how decisions will be made and used, using conflict productively to drive toward collaborative solutions, setting up consistent meeting spaces and time to create a comfortable and predictable environment, listening for and correcting imbalances in who is talking and who is heard, and helping the group process and work through charged and disputed topics.

2. Community outreach and meetings
A taskforce alone is generally not sufficient to understand the diversity of community perspectives and ensure broad community buy-in for the housing strategy. It should be paired with broader outreach, likely through neighborhood-based meetings and other strategies that take officials or their representatives out into the community.

The City of Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods centers their approach to community outreach around the notion that everyone learns and engages differently so the City needs a plethora of engagement strategies. For example, their process to engage the community in the development of the Mandatory Housing Affordability policy has included flyers to 88,000 households; 200 meet ups in people’s homes, bars, and community centers; door-to-door canvassing; teletown halls; online dialogue; opportunities to talk to city staff at farmer markets and community spaces; and more.

“It takes us to bridge the gap between people at the table and those who are not.”
– Leader of Community-Based Organization

While few cities have the resources to undertake so many different strategies at once, at a minimum, a city’s efforts to reach the community beyond a taskforce should include:

- Neighborhood-based outreach, such as dispersed community meetings, with a particular focus on reaching marginalized communities and those who are historically not active participants in local policy decisions;
- Materials and presentations in accessible, non-technical language;
- A clear summary of any relevant data and policy analyses to encourage engagement rooted in a shared analysis of problems and possible solutions;
- Forums for dialogue on real questions among community members and between community members and officials;
- Efforts to overcome barriers to engagement through translation, childcare, food, and transportation; and
- A clear explanation of how input will be used in the decision-making process and how the community can continue to engage through implementation.

3. Partnering with and funding trusted community-based groups

**Community groups as a bridge to the community:** In Pittsburgh, the city paired its affordable housing taskforce with a “deliberative democracy” engagement process with neighborhood-based meetings in various locations throughout the city, each of which began with an education session to build the capacity of community members. Community groups helped to strengthen those engagement sessions by ensuring people showed up. Community leaders flyeried and canvassed their neighborhoods to turn people out to the meetings, helping to boost the success of the process.

**City resources for community groups:** Such outreach by community groups can be more impactful with public resources. The Pittsburgh community leader suggested that with city resources community groups could have expanded their outreach to a broader set of neighborhoods, ensuring more consistent representation across neighborhoods; helped to educate residents before the meetings; and sustained the engagement through implementation. The Twin Cities fair housing planning process implemented that strategy, providing microgrants to community groups trusted by local residents. Facilitators of that process noted that funding community-based groups to conduct public meetings and collect community input was critical to bringing in the perspectives and needs of harder to reach residents, especially in immigrant communities. The Lower LA River Revitalization process also relied on stipends to trusted community organizations who then engaged residents in creative ways through existing community-based forums, like movie nights.

**Selecting community groups:** Successful processes have depended on public officials or the taskforce overseeing the community grants knowing the community well and understanding which groups are trusted in the community and have a track record of reliability. They also have invested in many different groups rooted in specific neighborhoods because different communities, cultures, language needs, and trust sensitivities are best served by different locally-rooted organizations.

4. Web-based tools to share information and facilitate community input and dialogue

Advocates, officials, and community leaders suggested that web-based tools can be a helpful supplemental strategy to get information out into the community and to receive community input. They reported that many people who do not have time to engage in meetings will make time to share their thoughts or review information online.
**Surveys:** Many cities, towns, and counties use on-line surveys. Surveys should be carefully and scientifically crafted to be sure they are reliable tools. It may also be beneficial to involve community representatives in the development of survey tools so they trust the outcomes.

**Dialogue tools:** Cities, towns, and counties are also using innovative web-based tools to supplement in-person engagement, providing additional opportunities for input and other avenues to spark dialogue. In addition to in-person engagement in the Mandatory Housing Affordability policy development, the City of Seattle used online tools, such as consider.it and Reddit, to facilitate community dialogue. People must identify themselves (to avoid anonymous comments) and then can offer opinions on the information provided by the city and respond to other people’s comments. Seattle officials have found the discourse to be civil and respectful and have watched residents change their opinions based on the online dialogue with other residents. While these tools cannot replace face-to-face engagement, they offer a way for the city to put out information, correct misinformation, invite in people who cannot attend in person meetings, and facilitate dialogue between residents.

**Cautions about social media and web-based engagement:** Officials also offered a few cautions about social media and web-based tools. One suggested that social media has the potential to mobilize a lot of community activity around one narrow issue in a way that misses the broader set of issues so officials must be careful to try to set the full context. Further, an overreliance on social media may disproportionately limit the engagement of seniors and people in areas with limited broadband and can underinvest in the in-person strategies described above that are critical to building collaborative dialogue, trust, and sustained capacity to engage. Officials should be careful to only use these technological engagement tools as supplemental strategies. In addition, in the design of community engagement strategies, officials should think about populations that may not be reached through in person meetings nor online tools and try to learn about their needs through advocacy or other community groups.

**How can cities, towns, and counties ensure that the engagement strategies are building long-term trust in government and overcoming historical inequities?**

The following principles are intended to guide more meaningful community engagement across the strategies outlined above to help a city, town, or a county overcome inequities and distrust in government.
1. Embrace community input to clarify issues and strengthen solutions

“The bigger the initial investment in community engagement, the more meaningful the discourse down the line when specific issues are being considered. I don’t mean to imply that consensus will be achieved; the measure here is that better questions are raised, more information is at hand and areas of agreement and disagreement are clearer.” – Former Assistant City Manager

The first step to meaningful community engagement is appreciating that leveraging community knowledge, experiences, concerns, creativity, and power is critical for generating strong and sustainable outcomes. In interviews with city officials, advocates, and community leaders, they described processes that are too often merely checking a box or set up to sell a set of solutions developed by city staff. These processes miss out on critical information about people’s lived experiences that may not be apparent in the data or may be overlooked by city officials. But some officials have discovered that the community can help answer the toughest questions with which they need to grapple and that “neighborhood involvement produces better plans.”

Treating the community as an asset also means understanding that community-based organizations bring important capacities and relationships that local governments can leverage to produce a stronger product. In the words of one community leader active in a grassroots neighborhood group, “We have the people. We have the support of the people. That’s what we have that the city doesn’t have.” Partnerships with organizations rooted in the community strengthen trust and accountability, ensure that community perspectives are brought in, and ultimately lead to a more successful plan and a strong coalition to implement the strategy.

2. Engage the most affected community members from the start

Building an effective community engagement process requires inviting community members in to shape the process and solutions right from the start. Many officials and consultants who work with cities described processes that failed to involve the community from the beginning and, as a result, the processes were delayed or derailed because of community push back, political opposition, and sometimes litigation. Including the most affected communities from the very start and all the way through implementation is critical to reaching the strongest plan, to a smooth process with community buy-in for the end product, and to overcoming historical distrust of government.
“Admittedly, I went into the task force, in many respects, with a predetermined idea of what we needed to accomplish as it related to affordable housing. However, the community engagement process really broadened my thinking as to the myriad of issues faced by the community and helped me understand how residents’ perspectives on affordable housing issues – and even their thoughts on what affordable housing means – varied considerably between neighborhoods.” – City Councilmember

Determining who is most affected and must be engaged is a local determination based on the experiences and needs in the community across neighborhoods; income, racial and ethnic groups; homeowners; renters; businesses; and other stakeholders. It is important to remember that there is great diversity within each city or region and officials should not assume that one or two large non-profits can represent the range of perspectives that should be included. For example, the Overlake Community Engagement Project, a part of the Puget Sound Sustainable Communities Initiative, assessed their community and partnered with 40 different organizations to reach their diverse ethnic communities, including Eritrean, Russian, Latino, Southeast Asian, Chinese, and Vietnamese residents, as well as diverse religious groups, youth, and others.

While specific local circumstances and dynamics may vary, in nearly every city in the United States, a deliberation about housing strategies will have the greatest impact on people of color and low-income people whose housing choices and access to opportunity have been shaped by segregation, discriminatory practices, a shortage of affordable housing, and displacement pressures. Learn more about neighborhood disparities. But people of color and low-income people may have barriers to engagement and may be distrustful of government, having experienced broken promises and a sense of powerlessness. As a result, engagement processes must be intentionally designed to increase the participation and voice of residents from impacted marginalized communities.

3. Listen

“If you’re going to invite people to the table, you better listen, be authentic, and be willing to change.” – Community Engagement Facilitator

Many officials, academics, and community leaders highlighted the importance of not just bringing people in and writing down their thoughts but asking real questions, listening, and being open to community perspectives. One community organizer described the need for city staff and city-retained consultants to be “authentic,”
explaining that people know when officials “think they are above them and are not going to respect their opinions and experiences.” Another community leader described a sense that city officials often grow defensive when community members disagree with them as if the community should not question them. Instead, officials should give community members “diplomatic recognition – the recognition that they, and the interests that they represent, are just as legitimate as the interest that... you represent.” Listening and treating community perspectives as legitimate, especially when the content is critical or emotional, may be challenging for some officials and cities may want consider training or facilitation services to help officials build those skills.

4. Be transparent and set expectations about how input will be used

Treating the community’s interests as legitimate also requires being transparent about how community input will shape decisions. In many cities, officials highlighted ways community input shaped their views and final strategies. In Pittsburgh, for instance, the community brought forward several strategies, including renter protections, tenant rights education, and community stabilization strategies, that city officials had not previously identified but came to see as important solutions to adopt.

Even when officials do not implement every community recommendation, they should acknowledge that they have heard the community input and set expectations about how that input will be used. When decisions are made, officials should explain how the community’s interests and suggestions were considered, which recommendations were implemented, and which were not and why not. One official made the simple suggestion that the summary of community input should not be in an appendix; it should be weaved into the content of the written plan and part of the context for the policy recommendations. A transparent process is also an opportunity to talk with community members and advocates the constraints the government is under, such as funding challenges, legal limitations, political infeasibility, and how decision makers will address conflicting community feedback. This frank dialogue can help to create more certainty in the development process down the line so that issues are not relitigated due to misunderstandings. Finally, officials should be transparent about the ways community members can reinforce their input and engage in successful implementation of the plan.

5. Consider unequal power dynamics

It is no secret that politics and power shape land use and zoning, housing policy, and public resource decisions. One official suggests city staff should “look right into the belly of the beast” and analyze the local political landscape to understand the power
dynamics that will influence the local decisions around housing strategies. Doing so will help officials engage with the community in a way that does not reinforce inequities.

Rooting engagement plans in an assessment of power dynamics also helps city officials appreciate the efforts of community members, especially those in marginalized communities, to organize and strengthen their collective voice. These efforts can be a healthy balance within the political landscape that shapes decisions. In Pittsburgh, for instance, officials appreciated a community-labor coalition’s efforts to provide feedback on the housing strategies and hold city officials accountable to implement the commitments. Oakland officials showed openness to community organizing and coalition-building by engaging in a year-long negotiation with a citywide network of anti-displacement advocates to develop a policy for the disposition of public land.

6. Level the playing field
In successful engagement strategies, there are efforts to ensure that everyone – both government and community representatives – has the information they need to participate from an informed perspective. Many processes level the playing field by linking opportunities for engagement with trainings, education materials, and leadership institutes on land use, housing, municipal resources, and budgeting to ensure that community leaders and grassroots groups have the technical skills to participate effectively. Community organizations can sometimes also draw on foundation-supported technical assistance and legal support, to develop the same reliable analysis and counsel as city staff and developers.

In addition, many places have recognized that government officials and other stakeholders will better understand community needs and recommendations if they are provided with education materials and trainings on racial and economic disparities. In the Twin Cities, for instance, members of the advisory committee overseeing the region’s fair housing plan were offered racial justice training along with the trainings they provided on technical housing issues. In Seattle, all city staff engage in trainings about structural racism and racial disparities. And Oakland is starting a process to help staff bring a racial equity lens to their decision-making.

7. Invest in process
Implementing these principles will require that city officials invest their time in process and appreciate that “meaningful community engagement is sometimes messy, ambiguous, iterative.” Process does not have to mean endless drawn out negotiations. In fact, several officials and advocates noted that schedules and action plans are important for setting expectations and making decisions. Nor does an investment in the process mean enduring endless, unproductive fighting.
For example, local governments in the Twin Cities invested in a year-long process to update their regional fair housing plan. That process created an advisory committee of city officials, housing stakeholders, and community advocates and leaders to develop a fair housing plan, working through stark disagreements over the degree to which affordable housing resources should be committed to wealthier communities to promote integration in those neighborhoods or invested in lower-income communities of color. Together, with the assistance of a skilled facilitator, the taskforce successfully selected and guided a consultant to craft a revised Analysis of Impediments with fair housing strategy goals and oversaw broad community engagement, including neighborhood-based conversations hosted by community groups.

The City of Oakland’s recent public land policymaking process is another example of a city investing its time in process, recognizing that it is as important as substance. To respond to community concerns about the City’s proposed public land policy, city officials met with a citywide network of anti-displacement advocates, often on a weekly basis for months, to discuss the network’s policy proposal and better understand each other’s perspectives. While the City did not invest resources other than high level officials’ time, its leaders were open to a new way of working on policymaking.

Such processes do not necessarily require significant financial resources but do require city officials to dedicate time and to focus their attention not just on the technical substance at hand but also the importance of building relationships and joint problem solving. They are strengthened by neutral and trusted facilitators to bring together diverse residents and stakeholders, help process emotional content and painful histories, and prioritize mutual understanding and collaborative approaches.

**How can a city, town, or a county measure the success of its community engagement process?**

The success of a city, town, or a county’s community engagement process cannot be measured by whether all participants are happy with the outcomes – indeed, that is an impossible outcome in most circumstances. Nor is the measure of success whether city officials moved forward the exact strategies they had in mind before engaging the community. Several officials commented that they believe the most successful processes were the ones in which their positions shifted after engaging with the community.

Here are ways to measure the success of community engagement:
• Did city officials learn new information about the needs or priorities of the community, particularly from segments of the community that have historically had less power in government decision-making?
• Did community participants learn about the constraints city officials face, such as limited resource or legal barriers, the unintended consequences of certain policies, or conflicting community needs?
• Did the organizations/participants and the officials involved shift their positions through the process through dialogue, listening, and learning from each other?
• Are there concrete ways that the community input influenced the final strategy?
• Did the city explain why some community recommendations/requests were not included?
• Did participants, especially those from low-income communities of color and other vulnerable communities, build political power and gain more access to government decision makers that they can leverage for influencing future processes or decisions?
• Was the strategy adopted and implemented?