Community Meetings for Busy People

How to Use this Document

This document is for busy people who are looking for a high-level introduction to justice-focused community engagement. You should be able to review this (and answer the embedded questions) in about 15 minutes. This is not a stand-alone document; it's an introduction to planning a series of successful community events and should be used to spark a discussion with people you're working with, and with your Groundwork USA **Brownfield Equitable Development Technical Assistance Provider**.

Ok! Let's get started!

1) Start with the End in Mind

You won't be able to tell if you've fully met your engagement goal if you don't consider what a successful engagement looks like before you begin. You should start by figuring out, broadly, the purpose of your community meeting/ engagement activity.

Are you hoping to…

Empower Community to Advocate for Change
(Residents make final decision, residents are trained in self-advocacy, residents steer decision-making process)

Collect Information and Ideas/Build Consensus
(Surveys, community mapping, and prioritization, informal conversations, voting for an idea)

Inform/Educate the Community About Issues and Opportunities
(Fact sheets, presentations, expert lectures, fliers, websites)

It's so tempting to jump to the top of this staircase, but know that education and consensus building are really important for establishing trust, strengthening relationships, and creating a foundation for empowerment.

Once you have a sense of your broad goal, **make it specific**.

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What, specifically, do you hope to have achieved at the end of your time together? What are your top two to three goals for the meeting? See below for a few examples, and then work out your own objectives.

Examples:

Objective: By the end of this meeting, community members will have identified and voted on the top three priorities for reuse of the vacant lot on Summer st. **(Empower)**

Objective: By the end of this meeting, community members will have a list of site cleanup requests to present to the city council at next month's meeting. **(Collect Information/Build Consensus)**

Objective: By the end of this meeting, community members will understand what happens during a brownfield contamination assessment and how long the process usually takes. **(Inform/Educate)**

Objective 1: _____

Objective 2: _____

Objective 3: _____

2) Pull Together your Stakeholders

A key element of equitable development is making sure that there's room at the table for everyone and that you do your best to get them there. But people are busy or have other challenges that may keep them from attending traditional community meetings. So, try a three-pronged approach to make sure that you're connecting with as many people as possible, not just the folks who always show up to speak to community issues.

You should…

Go to Them

Show up at locally owned businesses to chat with owners and staff.

Get permission and then post yourself in residential building common spaces to flag down and chat with residents on their way in and out.

Ask residents to have you over to discuss the issue in their home with their friends. It's never a bad idea to bring along a treat to share.

The "Going to Them" approach often involves longer engagements where you take a deep dive with a small group of people.

BEST FOR: Collecting Information, Empowering

Have Them Come to You

Traditional community meetings where you advertise and gather at central and accessible location.

If it's safe to do so, consider a field trip to view and discuss the site in question.

BEST FOR: Informing, Collecting Information, Empowering

Meet Them Where They Are

Bring a short pitch and engaging activity (such as voting, answering a short question, or giving feedback on a map) to places where people are already gathered or passing through, such as farmers markets, school events, festivals, main pedestrian routes during rush hour, and municipal community meetings.

These interactions are short— three minutes at most—so you have to catch people's eyes and be prepared with a quick pitch.

BEST FOR: Informing, Collecting Information

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Orienting the community to what you're trying to accomplish is vital to getting and maintaining their interest in the project. **Within your first three minutes of interacting with them (because they're busy, too!) they should know:**

1. What's the challenge at hand?

2. What's the opportunity for change?

3. What do you want from them and how long will it take?

4. What will you do with what you collect from them and when will you report back?

5. When will the resolution take place?

Now that you have your objectives, know where to reach out to community members, and know the components of your pitch, you might be wondering how to plan a community meeting that achieves your objectives, is exciting, and builds community momentum. Here are few questions and best practices to guide you:

1) Consider what every person is doing at every point in your meeting/interaction. Are they listening to a presentation? Writing their thoughts down? Engaging in a group discussion? Voting for their favorite idea? Aim for a variety of activities in each meeting/interaction.

2) Limit the amount of time any one individual spends talking **at** community members, and increase the amount of time they talk **to each other**/share out with the group. Try to keep a 5:1 ratio: five minutes engaging in discussion, dialogue, or feedback to every minute of listening to a presentation.

3) Having a tangible product that community members can photograph, take home, or view later is an important part of making sure what happens in your interaction goes beyond the meeting. What (drawing, collage, list of community ideas, model) will be produced by the end of your interaction?

4) Find ways to make your time together fun and positive. Brownfields can be emotionally heavy to discuss, but by integrating art, music, community assets, and conversations about the future, you'll start and end your meetings on a hopeful note. Are there local artists you can invite to open or close your meeting? Are there opportunities for icebreakers, games, or storytelling during your meeting?

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3) Get Creative with your Engagement!

Alright, here's the fun stuff (and the final section of this document!): a few tried-and-true community engagement activities that you can incorporate into your community meetings/engagements/activities. This document barely scratches the surface of best practices for justice-focused community engagement, so reach out to us **via our website** if you have questions or needs. We look forward to using this high-level document to develop a more tailored strategy with you!

Field Trip to the Site: Assuming the site is safe and you have permission to access it, a site visit (or cleanup activity!) can go a long way towards familiarizing stakeholders with the site and inspiring a community reuse vision.

Community Walk: Walk around the site, corridor, or neighborhood to collect information to be used in later decision making. During the walk, stakeholders can do things like evaluate the state of a vacant lot, question residents about community needs, or take stock of the types of businesses, resources, and assets present and absent from a commercial strip.

Dot-Voting: This is a great activity to get folks up and moving around the room. A series of statements or ideas are posted on the wall, and community members place stickers to show preference for one or more ideas. This is a great way to get a read of the room, have people vote on next steps, and understand community priorities.

PhotoVoices: Using smartphones, digital/film cameras, or in a pinch, disposable cameras, community members capture images around a site, question, or theme, and pair those images with narratives. The power of PhotoVoices is threefold: It encourages participants to explore their surroundings from new perspectives, builds a powerful platform for storytelling, and establishes a visual, written, and oral record of the community that can be used to stimulate dialogue around a planning process.

Community Mapping: Best done in small groups around a table, community members discuss area maps of the site and draw what changes they'd like to see directly on the map.

Electronic Polling: Using cellphones or electronic polling devices, you can ask attendees questions and see the results projected on a screen in real time. This is a quick way for everyone to get the read of a room.

Think. Pair. Share.: Pose a question about your community or the site and have attendees 1) silently think about their answer, 2) discuss their answer with a partner, and 3) share their partner's answer with the group.

Lego/Art Build: Best for younger attendees but appropriate for groups of all ages, have community members use Lego, blocks, and art supplies (like clay or markers) to redesign the brownfield site in question. Attendees then share and discuss their creations with the group.

Open House Post-Its (and dot-voting): Another activity to get a large group of folks moving: post a series of open-ended questions on posters around the room and give attendees post-it notes on which they can write their responses and stick under the questions. Attendees should then make a second loop around the room, putting dot stickers on the post-it answers they most agree with.

Pop-Up Events with a Street Stall: Host a community event at an existing community space or underutilized, to-be-revitalized space. At the event, create a "street stall," or a space where people can leave their feedback in either written, photographic, or verbal form. Feedback can also be displayed in a common public space, but would need to be accompanied by a vision of the project (either a description, or a visual and description).

Envisioning the Future: Hang two sheets of paper on the wall labeled "How would you describe [insert name of community or project site] to someone who has never been here?" and "In the next 5, 10, 15 years, how would you like to describe [insert community name or project site]?" If the group is large, consider breaking into smaller groups.

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