



Community Engagement for Local Housing Decisions

December 2024

Introduction

Housing policy and development decisions impact all members of a community. Yet, the public processes that shape housing action are primarily influenced by subsets of people who tend to be white, older, and homeowners, and speak English as their first language. Gaps in public input and decision-making processes can perpetuate long-standing inequities and inhibit the passage of policies meant to support local housing affordability and supply. While many local government leaders are aware of these shortcomings and may strive to develop more inclusive approaches, they often lack practical guidance or examples of more equitable and effective community engagement models.

In this paper, we clarify different community engagement models, highlight some entry points for local leaders hoping to achieve more equitable community engagement, and provide examples for them to consider as they assess and improve their approaches to engaging the community in housing policy decision-making.

Part 1, “Understanding Community Engagement,” starts by defining community engagement and describing some critical barriers to its equitable implementation. Part 2, “Improving Community Engagement,” provides guidelines and strategies for taking action. Throughout, we draw from a review of the literature on community engagement models and interviews with local housing practitioners and decision-makers. We do not intend to provide an exhaustive review of local housing or land use practices related to community engagement, but rather to present examples of promising approaches to advancing more equitable outcomes.

As more cities explore new community engagement strategies, more research is needed to determine what contributes to long-term improvements in public participation. Our examples highlight promising opportunities for change and experimentation in government processes; future research can strive to identify which practices are most effective within specific contexts.

Part 1: Understanding Community Engagement

Defining Community Engagement

Broadly stated, community engagement refers to interactions between an entity with decision-making authority and those likely to be affected by its decisions.

The term “community” refers to a group that shares a sense of belonging or cohesion. In the context of local housing decisions, “community” often refers to residents of a building, neighborhood, or jurisdiction. However, the term is not a synonym for “resident”: communities can form around a shared trait, a common value system, or a common interest. A common trait could be one’s neighborhood, but it could also be one’s race, ethnicity, age, family composition, housing status, income level, gender, or other social characteristics.

“Engagement,” while often reserved for activities in which a decision-maker wants to share information or obtain input from the public, can happen even when there is no immediate government decision at hand. Any activity that connects the government and members of the public, including festivals and regular operations of public-facing offices, is a form of engagement. Community engagement can build relationships, communicate timely facts and issues, collect feedback, open dialogue, recruit partners and resources, and even shift roles or decision-making power previously held by a government body to community members.

Community engagement, when done well, can help governments ensure that their decisions properly address the lived experiences of those impacted. Many government processes legally require community engagement, but even when not subject to formal regulations, local public sentiment may urge government officials to pursue community engagement.¹

However, community engagement risks amplifying the perspective of an unrepresentative subset of resource-rich community members if not undertaken carefully. This is particularly true in the case of housing or land use reform, where those who participate in public hearings oppose new housing construction at rates that differ from the general public.² Faced with this intense opposition, decision-makers and proponents of pro-housing policies may opt for limiting community engagement. However, initial evidence suggests that people in strong opposition to proposed land use or housing actions will find ways to engage even when there are limited official avenues for input.³

Rather than limit community engagement to avoid fierce and unrepresentative opposition, cities can structure their interactions with the public in ways that thoughtfully challenge existing barriers to equitable participation.

A note about terminology

A jurisdiction’s choice of terminology may convey its commitment to meaningful interaction and signal whose involvement is welcome. Federal agencies often use the word “participation” for any type of public involvement, including minimal input opportunities, while reserving the word “engagement” for more collaborative or sustained activities. Meanwhile, the terms “citizen” or “resident” may suggest that input may not be welcome from people who are not U.S. citizens, in the former case, or from those with non-residential ties to the area (such as employees, employers, or people who are trying to return after displacement) in the latter.

Barriers to Equitable Engagement

Public events like meetings, town halls, presentations, or workshops are technically open and available to anyone who wants to engage. In practice, older, white homeowners are often overrepresented, while renters and people of color are frequently underrepresented.⁴ Research suggests these disparities relate to barriers arising from the public’s personal circumstances and the limitations of current government processes.

Table 1.1: Summary of Barriers to Equitable Engagement

Community Barriers	Government Barriers
<p>Lack of Time Demands from family and work may lessen individuals’ ability to participate in traditional community engagement processes.</p> <p>Lack of Trust People who lack trust in government to meaningfully address their needs are less likely to participate in civic processes.</p>	<p>Lack of Buy-in Some local officials may not prioritize or value community engagement.</p> <p>Resource Constraints Local governments may not have staff time, funding, or expertise to implement more equitable forms of community engagement.</p>

Note. Authors’ framework developed through a review of literature regarding social disparities in community participation.

Community Barriers

Time

People have varying amounts of time to dedicate to community engagement opportunities. Individuals responsible for the care of young children or elderly family members may find that the time demands of work and family care conflict with community engagement opportunities. Low-income and middle-class families may face particularly challenging time constraints from family care responsibilities, as they are less able to access affordable childcare and eldercare services.⁵

Time burdens may also contribute to racial differences in community engagement access: an analysis of national data indicates that Black caregivers spend 28.5 more hours on caregiving duties each month than white caregivers, and Black women are more likely to face high caregiving demands on their time than men of any race.⁶ In addition, Black parents are more likely to be in the workforce while raising young children than parents of other races, and they are more likely to work non-standard hours.⁷

Trust

Individuals’ willingness to engage with local policy may differ based on their trust in government decision-makers to thoughtfully consider their perspective and act in their best interest. Experiences with various aspects of government help shape these perceptions and affect individuals’ likelihood of engaging with public processes when the opportunity arises. People who associate the government with positive experiences, policies, or programs are more likely to participate in civic processes. Likewise, people with negative experiences with government are less likely to engage with public processes.⁸

Race and income have shaped housing and development policy and thus have implications for the amount of trust different social groups may have in government. Policies like urban renewal and redlining, as well as the

failure of the federal government to protect consumers from predatory loans, have led to disproportionate negative impacts on low-income communities and communities of color.⁹ Thus, residents of neighborhoods that have experienced harmful and discriminatory housing policies may be mistrustful of new residential development that seems to ignore their needs for affordability or services. Whatever the specific local context, new engagement efforts will be more challenging if there is a foundation of mistrust.

Government Barriers

Lack of buy-in

Local officials—even when they are asked or required to pursue more inclusive community engagement models—may not see deepening engagement as needed or useful. Many are more inclined to prioritize informing the public of policy updates, rather than pursuing two-way streams of communication.¹⁰ Additionally, government officials may be reluctant to establish new engagement opportunities due to past interactions with unrepresentative and obstructive subsets of their communities.¹¹

Time and resource constraints

Government agencies and officials face numerous demands on their time and may struggle to dedicate staff or resources for community engagement. Research on community engagement has noted that limitations on resources to support public participation are one of the reasons engagement attempts fail.¹²

The implications of time and capacity limitations include missteps that can harm relationships with the communities the governments seek to engage, such as:

Selective engagement among underrepresented communities: Decision-makers seeking to engage underrepresented racial or ethnic groups may find it easier to reach higher-income households.¹³ This can skew the input received and leave affected groups still underrepresented.

Patchy communication: Local officials may devote resources to presenting or collecting information from community groups but not to reporting on the resolution of the decision-making process. Breaking the feedback loop with people who have been asked to engage can make it harder to re-engage them in the future.

Inaccessible meetings: Time pressures can lead local officials to rely on engagement methods that are simple to implement but inaccessible to communities. Inaccessibility can take many forms, such as:

- failure to hold meetings in places that are physically or technologically accessible,
- failure to advertise meetings to diverse communities,

- failure to provide adequate translation services,
- or failure to explain complex policy in a way that feels meaningful and relevant to community members.

Limited information-sharing within government: Addressing citizens' concerns often requires coordination among multiple agencies. City agencies may miss learning opportunities if there is limited information flow between departments.

Limited geographic and temporal scopes: Local housing decision-makers may prioritize input from people who live closest to the properties in question. This may miss people who have a stake in the future of a jurisdiction but are not current residents.

When engagement is intended to be easy for government officials but not for affected communities, all parties may leave with the perception that it yields little valuable information. If outreach or communication efforts are limited, turnout or response may be as well, leading public officials to think that community members are too busy or apathetic to want more engagement in the future.

Who Participates?

Barriers to individuals' time and trust, as well as government barriers in buy-in and resources, contribute to community engagement processes that may not accurately represent public sentiment. Research indicates that those who participate in community engagement processes are more likely to be white, male, and single-family homeowners.

Differences in Participation by Race, Income, and Gender

Race and class are salient in public meetings about housing or land use: the people who are most likely to participate are single-family homeowners, an interest group that is often white and upper-income.¹⁴ In addition to being racially and economically unrepresentative of households in many localities, homeowners often have a financial incentive to boost the value of their homes by minimizing new housing construction.¹⁵ Homeowners may also resist changing any part of their perceived “housing bundle”—i.e., the set of tangible and intangible factors that influenced their purchase decision and price, including the view, expected noise levels, traffic, local amenities, and especially schools.

Disparities in engagement by race, income, and gender are also reflected in the makeup of local decision-making bodies, which have an overrepresentation of non-Hispanic white residents, men, and homeowners.¹⁶ Public officials tend to be disproportionately homeowners as well, with some jurisdictions barring renters from serving in these roles.¹⁷



Differences by Geography

The intensity of community participation can vary by the geographic scope of the proposed government action. For land use decisions, local governments may promote and prioritize engagement among those who live closest to the site in question. However, this may inadvertently skew engagement to prioritize oppositional voices. Residents who support housing affordability and development generally may not feel compelled to engage in decisions about a particular project that is not in their neighborhood. Meanwhile, the people living closest to a particular site may vocally resist any attempts at development in an effort to preserve their perceived housing bundle.¹⁸

The Limitations of Status Quo Engagement

A combination of community members' limited time, lack of trust in government, and common limitations in government processes contribute to a status quo in community engagement that does not accurately capture the needs of low-income communities or communities of color.

In Newark, New Jersey, for example, sweeping zoning reforms to promote denser development met opposition from several community groups. In op-eds about local pushback, the mayor framed the opposition as “NIMBYs” motivated by their stigma against low-income families and racial minorities.¹⁹ However, the South Ward Environmental Alliance (SWEA), a self-proclaimed pro-density environmental justice group that helps residents in a historically Black neighborhood manage damage from repeated flooding, voiced concern about the passage of the zoning reforms due to perceived city inaction on wastewater infrastructure.²⁰ The misalignment between SWEA and the mayor illustrates how engagement that focuses on the rhetoric of wealthier, whiter communities may leave the concerns of low-income or communities of color unaddressed. This results in missed opportunities for dialogue and building support for equitable housing policies.

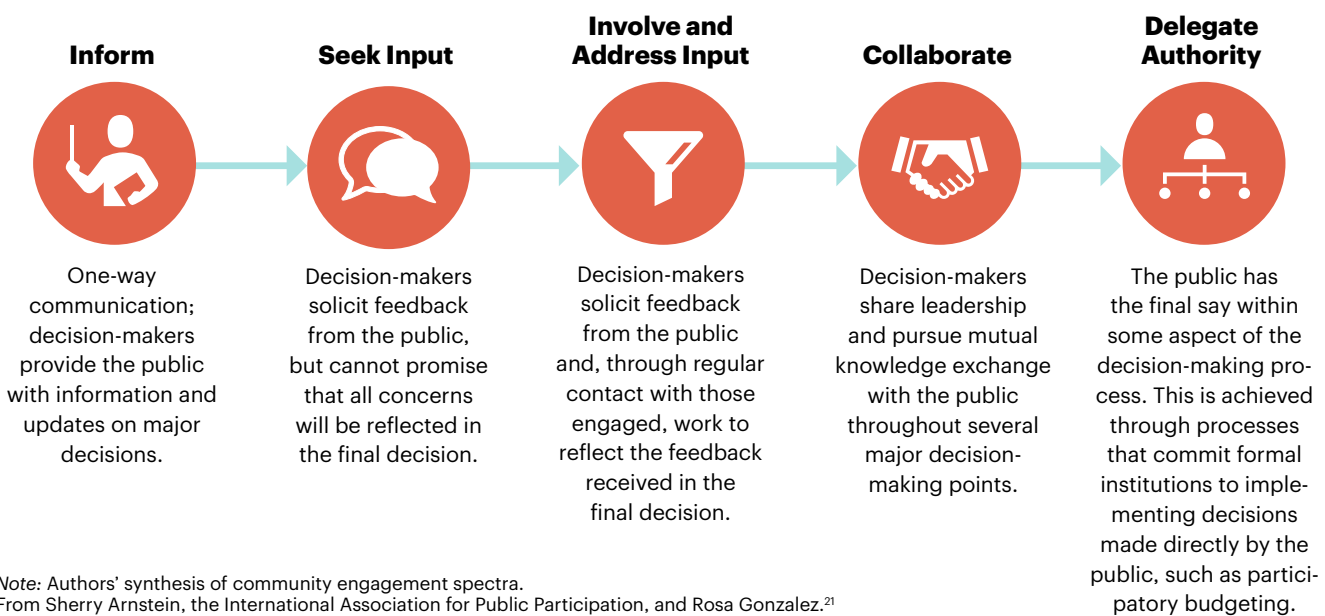
With thoughtful planning, cities can reimagine existing touchpoints and make incremental changes to undertake community engagement in a way that meaningfully addresses barriers using resources available to governments. To this end, we provide guidance and examples of strategies from several cities in Part 2.



Part 2: Improving Community Engagement Intentions and Goals

Improving community engagement requires localities to first define goals, and then create feasible approaches to implement them. Many scholars and practitioners have organized a range of common engagement goals on a spectrum, and these models all share a similar structure: on one end communication is narrowly defined and solely informational, with no opportunity for community response or comment; on the other end are more intensive activities with ongoing, meaningful decision-making roles for community members. Figure 2.1 synthesizes community engagement models from three scholar-practitioners into one simplified spectrum. For a more detailed discussion of community engagement spectra, see the appendix.

Figure 2.1: Simple Community Engagement Spectrum



Process and Practical Elements

Once engagement goals are articulated, cities can craft practical steps to fulfill them. As detailed in Part 1, “more” engagement will remain ineffective in representing public sentiment if critical barriers to equitable community involvement are left unaddressed. Guidance from planners, community engagement specialists, and researchers points to five key lessons for local officials seeking ways to improve their engagement efforts.

1. Know your starting point.

The American Planning Association’s *Planning for Equity Policy Guide* suggests that cities begin with a self-assessment to identify relevant forms of “capacity, limitations, history, and power dynamics.”²² For comprehensive self-assessments, cities should consider the following:

Identify major participation barriers or shortcomings in engagement approaches. Comprehensive strategies to improve engagement depend on a common understanding of local barriers. This can start with an internal review of current community outreach and engagement procedures and resources. Practices like

holding meetings during the workday, restricting participation to in-person attendees, and solely providing public documents in English can limit participation, particularly from historically underrepresented groups.

Conduct targeted outreach to local neighborhood, cultural, or religious groups. Community-based organizations may be willing to share insights on the types of engagement resources that might improve participation or offer direct support to reach and convene their members. Officials can plan to offer the specific supports that community groups suggest might encourage engagement—such as childcare or food for participants, accessible facilities, or translation services.

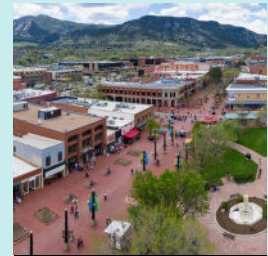
Compensate people for their time and experience. Paying stipends or offering modest incentives may help increase participation in time-intensive engagement processes, particularly among people who might not otherwise participate in public forums due to the competing demands of work and family care.²³

2. Assess your definition of “community.”

Jurisdictions with predominantly white residents may need to carefully consider and address the enduring legacy of racial segregation within their community engagement processes. Communities can start addressing segregation by documenting racist policies, tracking racial disparities in resource access, and educating current residents on the deliberate policy decisions that helped shape their jurisdictions.²⁴

City Example: Boulder, Colorado

Almost 80 percent of the city’s population is white—compared to 59 percent nationwide—a trend which city officials and local scholars attribute to land use practices that restricted growth and de-emphasized affordable, higher-density housing.²⁵ In 2021, Boulder hosted the Housing Equity Symposium, an event that aimed to spread public awareness of the city’s exclusionary practices and share strategies for how the city can be more welcoming to newcomers.²⁶



Regional Example: Northeastern New York

Adirondack Park covers 6 million acres of northeastern New York state, including the cities of Lake Placid, Saranac Lake, and Lake George. New York taxpayers fund the preservation of the public lands and recreational areas, but the residents and visitors of the Adirondacks are more likely to be white than New York state residents overall.²⁷ The state launched the Adirondack Diversity initiative to improve how welcoming and relevant the region is to all New York residents.²⁸ The initiative’s work includes hosting educational sessions,

engaging with experts from outside of the region, and conducting marketing and outreach specifically to underrepresented communities.



City Example: Columbus, Ohio

The Weinland Park Collaborative spearheads a neighborhood revitalization effort that convenes multiple stakeholders to continuously interact with residents to learn about their needs. The collaborative includes the city, major employers, funders, social service agencies, the Weinland Park Community Civic Association, and a developer.²⁹ The Association uses an annual festival, neighborhood dialogues, and other activities to build relationships and trust between neighbors. It has also arranged professionally-facilitated community meetings about prospective new developments.³⁰ To further increase inclusion, the local civic association amended its charter to open membership to renters.³¹ As new developments and investments transformed the working-class neighborhood into a mixed-income one, the collaborative maintains a relationship with local residents.

3. Commit to an ongoing relationship with communities.

Local officials should develop lasting and meaningful relationships with community members. This includes creating opportunities for communication beyond required community input processes, which can take place using new or existing community infrastructure.

Launch new partnerships to promote continuous interaction between different stakeholders. An extended partnership that connects government staff to local organizations and other key stakeholders can help community members develop relationships with government officials and foster an understanding of their roles over time. It could also mean giving communities tools to hold the government accountable for their commitments.

Leverage events community members already attend and standard encounters with government representatives. Some local housing officials recognize regular opportunities for face-to-face and phone interactions, such as intake hours or use of a 311 call center, as a type of engagement since staff are tasked with listening to and addressing a wide range of community members' concerns.³² With additional resources, data from these interactions can be shared with those in decision-making roles.

Similarly, public events (health fairs, job fairs, etc.) and annual community functions can become opportunities for local officials and community members to interact. Engagement activities related to upcoming housing and land use decisions could be incorporated into these encounters, especially if the events attract people typically underrepresented in other engagement interactions.

Address power imbalances within relationships. Collaboration techniques applied without addressing power imbalances can lead to tokenism, in which community participants are not supported to represent their own experiences and needs. Facilitating community involvement in determining the goals of new initiatives, taking action to achieve these goals, receiving benefits from any action taken, and evaluating the efficacy of new initiatives can help ensure that community members have sufficient opportunities to express themselves and share their expertise in meaningful ways.

4. Improve and expand communication.

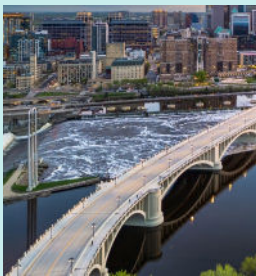
Communication between decision-makers and the public is the crux of community engagement and relationship-building. At each level of the community engagement spectrum, cities can adopt the following guidance to understand where and how they can improve their communication with stakeholders.

Set clear expectations about the goals and resources available for engagement efforts. Setting clear expectations can help foster satisfaction and trust with community engagement efforts; failing to do so can undermine efforts to build a relationship with community members.

Assess and improve how information is conveyed to people who are not fluent in English or who are unfamiliar with government jargon. Providing translation services for languages commonly spoken in a jurisdiction is a fundamental step to equitable communication. Hiring a plain language expert or training staff to convert housing jargon to common phrases can help get information to people who are not familiar with housing agencies, planning processes, or policies. While investment in translation services and producing materials in multiple languages may require funding, incorporating clear, non-technical language in written materials shared with the public can be a direct and meaningful improvement to community engagement activities.

Facilitate creative outlets for community input. Cities can look to developing new, flexible, and low-cost strategies to engage the public in response to the inaccessibility of community meetings.

Follow up after community members have provided input on a planning process or policy decision. Public engagement is unlikely to be perceived as authentic when communities provide input but are not kept informed about the outcomes of the issues they weigh in on. Finding ways to follow up with community members and communicate how their input was considered in decisions is an important opportunity to build trust and strengthen relationships for future engagement.



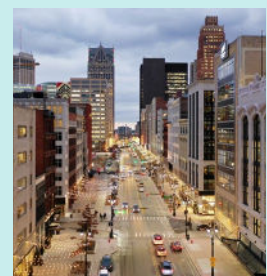
City Example: Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota

Evaluators of an engagement effort found that some community organizations were dissatisfied with the engagement process due to the one-off nature of their interactions with community members. Community groups received funding to solicit input from the people they served, but the quick turnaround set for their work meant they often could not reach a fully representative sample of their membership and failed to communicate what, if anything, would change in response to community feedback. Government representatives viewed the role of the work

differently, since they had understood the time and resource constraints of the process in advance. The author concluded that “communities need to know what they are getting in return for their participation.”³³

City Example: Detroit, Michigan

A community development project increased youth civic engagement through the use of a novel engagement strategy. This strategy, known as “Photovoice,” mobilizes community members around a particular concern by recruiting them to photograph their neighborhoods and engaging them in facilitated discussions of their findings. Youth aged 18 to 21 were more likely to believe in the importance of community engagement and their ability to make a difference in their community after participating in the project.³⁴



5. Ensure city leadership understands the utility and goals of equitable community engagement.

Pursuing ongoing relationships with communities, deploying different forms of communication, and broadening the “public” served by local government often requires buy-in from city leadership to be successful and sustained. While most city leadership understands the legal and political necessity of community engagement, some remain hesitant to reform current efforts or establish new strategies. In these cases, sharing strategies from other cities can show that gradual local change is possible. The following section provides examples that demonstrate how shifting community engagement strategies can be pursued gradually and with attention to existing inequities.

Strategies: Snapshots from 12 Cities

The following 12 cities provide examples of strategies that address common barriers to equitable community engagement. We characterize each by their position on the engagement spectrum introduced in Figure 2.1. The research team gathered information on these strategies through public materials and interviews with eight representatives from city staff, firms hired to implement community engagement plans, and community partners involved in government-led engagement strategies.

We sourced additional examples from the Housing Solution Lab’s case study repository, including the Mandatory Housing Affordability policy in Seattle, WA; an affordable housing task force in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; a fair housing assessment in Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas; and a racial equity strategy in Arlington, Texas. We also included the elimination of single-family zoning in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and updates to public land use strategy and policy in Oakland, California as examples.

Project descriptions

Gastonia, North Carolina: Inform. The city launched the Municipal Citizens’ Academy in 2017 to equip residents with a comprehensive knowledge of city operations. The annual program convenes a cohort of residents to learn more about municipal operations through site visits and presentations from various city staff.³⁵ This type of programming can help overcome historic information asymmetries between socioeconomic groups, building a base of well-informed community members who can advocate for their needs.

Phoenix, Arizona: Inform. The city incorporates multiple languages and communication styles within its planning processes, including the Annual Action Plan for the city’s U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grants, the Housing Phoenix Plan to increase supply and affordability, and the ongoing implementation of its Choice Neighborhoods site in the Edison-Eastlake community. These multi-pronged efforts help ensure communities within Phoenix have access to similar information about government decision-making, particularly in a city where almost 40 percent of households speak a language other than English at home.³⁶

Elk Grove, California: Seek Input. The city of Elk Grove updates its state-mandated housing needs plan, known as the “Housing Element,” every eight years. To do this, it must identify sites to accommodate more housing to meet state-determined growth targets, a process that often requires rezoning. For the last few cycles of its Housing Element update, many locations proposed for multifamily development have met resistance from community members and property owners. In response to this opposition-heavy environment, local officials sought the use of Balancing Act, a web-based tool often utilized for participatory

budgeting, to facilitate collective consensus-based decision-making.³⁷ Community members had to indicate their preference for where new housing should be built to participate, a feature that helped the city gather comprehensive and constructive input.

San Francisco, California: Involve and Address Input. PG&E, a regional utility company, commissioned two design studios to undertake a community engagement process to help re-imagine a brownfield site in San Francisco's Hunters Point neighborhood. The design team, consisting of Envelope and Liz Ogbu's Studio O, organized over 200 events and touchpoints to learn about local needs, communicate project progress, and build trust with community members. These included events like job trainings, health fairs, movie nights, and cultural festivals. These diverse activities promoted community involvement by pairing needed services and recreation with community engagement opportunities, while their recurring nature allowed the project team to establish consistent and iterative communication with residents.

Wichita, Kansas: Involve and Address Input. Faced with a city government staff leaner than many cities of similar size,³⁸ the city of Wichita has tested multiple forms of community engagement that do not overextend its resources. These include centralizing the external affairs arm of each city department through a Strategic Communications office and using an online platform to organize public information and collect community feedback. The city applied its existing engagement strategies to a wider range of policy processes after it received its allocation of American Rescue Plan Act dollars.

Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota: Collaborate. The region's 2016 analysis of barriers to fair housing aimed to increase the racial and ethnic diversity represented in community input. An advisory committee, consisting of representatives from local government and community organizations, supported the fair housing analysis by providing feedback on the selection of the consultant to conduct the analysis, the scope of their analysis, and their proposed strategies. The committee also encouraged the creation of a community engagement grant process, in which a consortium of local governments funded community organizations to collect feedback on fair housing concerns from the populations they serve. While these processes increased the accessibility of regional decision-making processes for several underrepresented groups, the brief timeline allocated for engagement meant that government partners were limited in their ability to commit to an ongoing relationship with newly engaged communities.

Charlottesville, Virginia: Delegate Authority. Piedmont Housing Alliance, an affordable housing developer and property manager in central Virginia, deepened its level of community engagement with the redevelopment of its Kindlewood property. The publicly subsidized housing development was nearly 40 years old and needed extensive upgrades. During the redevelopment process, the organization created a resident-led Advisory Committee—shifting from consultation-based strategies to collaboration and, in some cases, deferring to resident recommendations.

Strategies to increase resident trust

Building trust between governments and community members takes time and sustained communication. The strategies highlighted in the table below are examples of individual initiatives that can be helpful elements of broader, long-term efforts to increase resident trust in government processes.

Engagement Goal	Strategy Snapshots
<p>Inform</p>	<p>Phoenix: Engagement Through Services City staff bring a desired service, such as pet clinics or self-defense classes, to community members. The city presents community members with policy updates and opportunities to provide comments at these points of service. These mutually beneficial interactions can form the basis of a consistent and reliable relationship between community members and the city.</p>
<p>Seek Input</p>	<p>Dallas-Fort Worth: Outsourcing Facilitation Needs A HUD-mandated regional fair housing assessment used public meetings, focus groups, and individual stakeholder interviews to gather information on local barriers to fair housing. Researchers from a local university facilitated these efforts instead of city officials, aiming to help residents feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and critiques.³⁹</p> <p>Seattle: Pursuing Multi-format Public Outreach The city’s Department of Neighborhoods distributed flyers to 90,000 households; organized 198 meetups in people’s homes, bars, and community centers; conducted door-to-door canvassing; and provided opportunities to talk to city staff at farmers’ markets and community spaces.⁴⁰ The input gathered from this process informed eight principles for how the new Mandatory Housing Affordability policy should be applied throughout the city and supported the city’s environmental review of the proposed policy.⁴¹</p>
<p>Involve and Address Input</p>	<p>San Francisco: Community Engagement Through Storytelling The design team created community storytelling events where residents had the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences in the neighborhood. These events helped residents engage with the project team on their own terms.</p> <p>San Francisco: Leveraging Community Events The design team organized fun or useful community programming on the site that PG&E aimed to redesign. These included health fairs, music festivals, and job workshops. At each event, they gathered feedback from community members on the design and use of the site, which then informed future programming. This iterative, long-term, and responsive workflow built trust between community members and the design team.</p> <p>Arlington: Signaling City Commitment With a Community Task Force Arlington City Council established a task force to generate recommendations for a local racial equity plan. The task force included 15 city staff and 15 residents appointed by the mayor and city council. The task force facilitated public dialogue on racial equity through town halls, public meetings, focus groups, and individual interviews.⁴²</p>

Engagement Goal	Strategy Snapshots
Involve and Address Input	<p>Minneapolis: Deploying Iterative Engagement Opportunities In 2020, Minneapolis became the first large city to eliminate single-family zoning. The city developed resident buy-in for the policy and the broader comprehensive plan through a multi-phase engagement process. Public input informed the scope of the plan, the analytical frameworks used to understand local issues, and the specific policy tools recommended for implementation.⁴³</p>
Collaborate	<p>Twin Cities: Structuring Engagement With an Advisory Committee An advisory committee supported a regional fair housing analysis by providing feedback on the selection of the consultant slated to conduct it, the scope of their analysis, and strategies to overcome barriers to fair housing choice. The committee included representatives from community organizations.⁴⁴</p> <p>Twin Cities: Partnering With Community Organizations for Outreach A regional fair housing consortium awarded 17 community organizations a total of \$71,000 to collect feedback from the populations they serve. The organizations conducted outreach using a standardized survey—an approach that some organizations found helpful but others found limiting. The information obtained through these microgrants was published in the final fair housing analysis and informed the report’s recommendations.⁴⁵</p>
Delegate Authority	<p>Charlottesville: Facilitating Resident Leadership With an Advisory Committee The Advisory Committee for Kindlewood, a federally subsidized housing development, consists of nine resident-elected representatives and three to six members from the broader Charlottesville community (including city staff). The committee is included in every major decision about the community, including choices about the development process, open space, and building scale.</p>

Strategies to address resident time constraints

Demands on community members' time can come from several sources, including family, work, and travel to public meeting locations. Below, we highlight examples of strategies cities can adopt to address various kinds of constraints on community members' time. We encourage cities to tailor their strategies to address the specific local barriers identified in an assessment of current local engagement processes, as discussed in the "Process and Practical Elements" section.

Engagement Goal	Strategy Snapshots
<p>Inform</p>	<p>Phoenix: Engagement Through Services A strategy that helps the city build trust with residents can also help overcome resident time constraints: providing clinics and recreational activities as touchpoints between city staff and community members can help lessen the time burdens that engagement may pose on residents' lives.</p>
<p>Seek Input</p>	<p>Elk Grove: Modulating Meeting Times and Locations to Increase Participation The city held virtual meetings at a variety of times to explain zoning processes that support housing density. For in-person meetings, the city chose locations spread across the city. Both work to decrease or eliminate the barrier that travel time may pose on community participation.</p>
<p>Involve and Address Input</p>	<p>Wichita: Addressing the Public Through Radio City officials broadcast weekly messages on Spanish-language radio and a Spanish-language podcast. Such communication can help reach the public without disrupting their schedules.</p>
<p>Collaborate</p>	<p>Oakland: Managing Time Demands With Project Facilitation Citywide anti-displacement advocates drafted a comprehensive policy proposal for public land use to submit to the City Council. Advocates noted that having a neutral third-party facilitator available to manage timelines, align schedules, and prepare documents was critical to making the long, complex process feasible for participants.⁴⁶</p>
<p>Delegate Authority</p>	<p>Charlottesville: Pursuing Iterative Design on Residents' Schedules The Advisory Committee meets once a month. This pacing keeps participation manageable for the residents on the committee. In order to make the most of these sessions, Piedmont Housing Alliance works with the architects and engineers for its Kindewood property to respond to committee feedback with proposed design changes that are ready to be presented by the next committee meeting.</p>

Strategies to overcome government resource barriers

As detailed in Part 1, government constraints in staff time, funding, and expertise in engagement can lead to processes that are ineffective in capturing and addressing public input. These gaps are often most acutely felt by historically underrepresented communities. Below, we detail strategies cities have used to boost their ability to undertake more equitable forms of community engagement.

Engagement Goal	Strategy Snapshots
<p>Inform</p>	<p>Gastonia: Deploying a Citizen Information Initiative The city established the Municipal Citizens’ Academy, an annual program where 20 community members learn from a variety of city departments about how local government works. Such programs can help governments with limited experience in emerging equitable community engagement practices empower residents to be informed advocates for their own communities.</p> <p>Phoenix: Reaching Renters by Mail Mailers from the Housing Department go to all residential addresses in Phoenix, not just the property owner’s address of record. This helps the city reach renters. The department also distributes materials in various languages commonly spoken in the city. This can be a relatively low-cost way to expand public awareness and access to government processes.</p>
<p>Seek Input</p>	<p>Elk Grove: Deploying Participatory Technology Utilizing technology that can gather and analyze comprehensive resident feedback can reduce demands on staff time to interpret public input. Elk Grove uses Balancing Act, a participatory budgeting tool, to help residents provide constructive input on rezoning decisions. To submit input, residents had to create their own rezoning plans that meet the state mandate for housing growth. After residents submitted their plans, city staff reviewed and summarized the results so the City Council could make an informed decision about which sites to rezone for more housing.</p> <p>Elk Grove: Partnering With Community Organizations for Outreach The city works with community partners to support outreach efforts when their engagement attempts are not reaching a representative segment of the city. This includes groups like Al-Misbaah, a local Islamic organization that is particularly helpful in reaching Afghan refugees in the city. Partnerships like these address the limited time government staff may have to conduct equitable forms of outreach.</p> <p>Pittsburgh: Designing Processes With Engagement Experts City governments can work with engagement specialists to increase their ability to connect with new audiences in novel formats. In Pittsburgh, a city-established Affordable Housing Taskforce worked with a small team of civic designers to organize public engagement opportunities as Deliberative Community Forums. During these sessions, community members participated in facilitated small-group discussions and a Q&A with city representatives, allowing participants to engage with housing policy in a discussion-based format.⁴⁷</p>

Engagement Goal	Strategy Snapshots
Involve and Address Input	<p>Wichita: Coordinating Outreach Between Departments The city hosts Social Media Town Halls where representatives from each of the city’s departments come together and answer questions from the public. Coordinating engagement opportunities across departments can help lessen the burden on individual agencies to plan and host outreach events.</p> <p>Wichita: Investing Federal Dollars in a Community Engagement Platform Wichita complements its in-person engagement efforts with Forum, a website where residents can learn and provide feedback about an array of city issues and projects that range from parcel-specific proposals to the citywide budget. Such platforms can help city governments collect, organize, and quickly assess public feedback, decreasing the staff time required to process the engagement results.</p>
Collaborate	<p>Twin Cities: Partnering With Community Organizations for Outreach A strategy that helped overcome barriers in trust also helped address government resource barriers: partnering with community organizations to conduct outreach helped a regional fair housing consortium reach community members who were often underrepresented in past regional fair housing analysis.⁴⁸ This partnership helped the consortium reach more individuals from a broader array of communities without imposing additional time-intensive responsibilities on city staff.</p> <p>Oakland: Enabling Comprehensive Policy Proposals City officials regularly met with a citywide network of anti-displacement advocates to respond to community concerns about Oakland’s proposed policy updates to utilize public land. Throughout these meetings, advocates shaped their own comprehensive policy proposals for public land use. This process helped create an additional action for consideration, increasing the robustness of the city’s analysis without requiring more staff time to research and draft an additional policy alternative.⁴⁹</p>
Delegate Authority	<p>Charlottesville: Including the City in Ongoing Committee Meetings Two of 15 members of Kindlewood’s resident-led Advisory Committee represented the city: one was a council member, and the other was an assistant city manager. Their regular attendance at Advisory Committee meetings gave them in-depth insight into the needs of residents through a format that did not require city staff time to organize and facilitate the meetings.</p>

Conclusion

Housing policy and development decisions impact all members of a community. Yet, the public processes that shape housing action do not typically engage all community stakeholders, which can limit local housing policy reform efforts. With this paper, we clarify different community engagement models and provide entry points for local leaders to design and pursue more equitable practices. Going forward, ongoing research will be needed to identify the most effective strategies for different contexts and to learn from local innovation.

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Appendix:

Three Community Engagement Spectra

Multiple versions of a community engagement spectrum exist that build on a similar basic framework, ranging from lower-touch, informational approaches to more intensive models that shift decision-making power to community members.

A foundational engagement spectrum for planners and policy analysts is Sherry Arnstein's eight-step model called "A Ladder of Citizen Participation."⁵⁰ Developed in 1969, the eight-level ladder describes two levels of non-participation, in which the decision-maker creates false participatory opportunities. Next are three levels that the author asserts can be legitimate parts of an engagement plan but ultimately offer no real power to communities: informing, consulting, and placating (i.e., giving a few people token roles). The final three rungs on the ladder all offer some degree of meaningful decision-making power transferred to community members from government actors: partnership, delegated power, and citizen control.

A more recent version of the community engagement spectrum comes from the International Association for Public Participation (also known as IAP2). IAP2 proposes a five-part "Public Participation Spectrum," which presents many of Arnstein's ideas in the context of promises that an official is making to the public.⁵¹ The first two levels (Inform and Consult) are appropriate for situations in which public officials can promise a flow of information but no resolution. IAP2's third level (Involve) promises regular contact and that public concerns will be "directly reflected in the alternatives developed." The fourth level (Collaborate) engages community members from the point of identifying options to weighing solutions. The final level (Empower) puts decisions directly in the public's hands.

Rosa Gonzalez, the founder of Facilitating Power, applied ideas from both Arnstein's ladder and IAP2's spectrum to create a third model: "The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership."⁵² Gonzalez brings back the idea of non-participation as the lowest level of engagement, which denies community members the opportunity to participate, receive accurate information, or even listen in on decision-making meetings. In practice, this can often be the public's experience of local government. She then follows the IAP2's first four steps (inform, consult, involve, and collaborate) before ending with Defer To, in place of Empower, IAP2's final level. This spectrum also presents examples of activities that may exist at each level, the message officials are sending to communities (similar to IAP2's promises), and the impact of selecting this level of engagement. For example, the impacts of ignoring, informing, and consulting are marginalization, placation, and tokenism, in that order.

Arnstein's and Gonzalez's descriptions of lower levels of engagement make clear that deepening engagement is crucial. The American Planning Association's *Planning for Equity Policy Guide* also calls on local officials to engage in more participatory planning, including higher rungs on Arnstein's ladder.⁵³