Community Engagement Guidebook

2023 Peer Cities Network
Learning Module

Housing Solutions Lab
Building and sharing knowledge to
advance equitable local housing policy.

HESTER ST

ORGANIZATION / DATE

FACILITATOR / NOTE TAKER

...perience + housing choice

...ircles that represent the **top 2 reasons** why you live in your current neighborhood

WORK AND SCHOOL

Availability of Subsidized Housing

probability or preference in affordable apartment, subsidized housing including NYCHA, or housing below or based-to-housing

Ease of Transportation

how close you live to the subway, trains, or buses; availability of Access-A-Ride or other accessible transit options; the length of your...

School Quality

quality of local schools – including resources, student performance, classroom size, and language accessibility

NEIGHBORHOOD

Sense of Belonging

Environment

Accessibility

the physical accessibility of your home or apartment; the physical accessibility of buildings, streets, and sidewalks, and public spaces in your neighborhood

Local Businesses and Services

how close you live to quality and affordable grocery stores (including those that accept SNAP), banks, childcare, doctors, or other amenities

...main reason why you want to stay OR want to move to a different neighborhood

I want to move to a different neighborhood because...

Contents

*Left: A community member chooses what neighborhood
amenities are most important to them.*

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Executive Summary

With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Housing Solutions Lab at the NYU Furman Center brings together housing leaders from five small to midsize cities for peer learning, networking, and planning activities to develop innovative, equitable local housing solutions. Network participants focus on advancing specific projects or initiatives intended to address longstanding housing challenges and disparities in their communities relating to local land use and zoning reform; eviction prevention; rental and security deposit assistance; increasing access to homeownership; efforts to increase access to low-poverty, opportunity-rich neighborhoods; or efforts to address vacant, abandoned and deteriorated housing.

Through the cohort-based program, the Lab supports city leaders in building essential knowledge, skills, and capacity to advance their project while working collaboratively with other small and midsize cities throughout the country. Participants have access to timely and practical data and policy resources, technical assistance, and information from housing experts to help them pursue equitable, evidence-based housing policies. They also have access to an ongoing national community of support to share ideas and receive feedback from other practitioners.

During the eight-month program, city teams attend regular sessions providing guidance on creating effective community engagement and communication strategies, designing interventions that draw lessons from past policies, using data to target populations most in need, and measuring progress towards goals, among other topics. Participants leverage Lab data and policy resources and opportunities to work with technical assistance providers that will help with project development and implementation.

Hester Street: Who We Are

HESTER STREET (HST) is a New York City-based nonprofit with national reach that devotes urban planning, design, and development expertise to support community-led change throughout the five boroughs and beyond. We provide technical assistance and capacity-building support to community-based organizations (CBOs) and government agencies to advance participatory planning, transformative policy, and equitable community development.

HST works closely with people of color (POC)-led and -serving CBOs to provide technical capacity to advance their goals and project work. We also work with government executives, legislators, and agencies to develop and deploy the skills and tools necessary to ensure transparency, accessibility, equity, and accountability to communities of color.

We envision neighborhoods, cities, towns, and regions where resident concerns and priorities are centered in the planning and policy decisions that most directly impact them; and where the health, well-being, and resilience of all community members are valued above profitability and expediency. HST believes in a thriving democracy built on the active participation of everyone, specifically people and communities that have been persistently excluded from decision-making. Designing avenues for inclusive civic engagement is central to our work. We collaborate with neighborhood leaders to foster vibrant civic life that builds community power, cohesion, self-determination, and government accountability.

HST is made up of designers, architects, planners, community developers, and organizers who pair technical expertise with a deep understanding that the most successful projects and plans are grounded in local needs and informed by community priorities. Our staff of 26 is woman-led, majority women (77%) and majority POC (62%).

Hester Street staff.

Community members identify their needs and priorities.

What We Did

Supporting the Housing Solution Lab (Lab), HST developed responsive technical assistance (TA) for three cities within the 2023 Peer Cities Network (Network). Working directly with Skokie, IL; Jackson, TN; and Cheyenne, WY; HST hosted research and discovery sessions with these cities to understand their community engagement needs and the conditions facing working residents, community organizations, and other government entities. Technical assistance and discussion addressed the intersection of community engagement and topics including, but not limited to, zoning and land use, multifamily housing development, green retrofits, naturally occurring affordable housing, comprehensive housing plans, and housing trust funds.

HST synthesized the findings from these discovery sessions and developed individualized community engagement TA plans for each city we worked directly with. Monthly workshops and follow-up activities covered topics such as community engagement planning and strategy development, a spectrum of community engagement stakeholder power mapping, a backcasting exercise, and tools and case studies for engagements.

TA designed for the individual needs of these three cities was complemented by programming provided to the full Network. HST delivered a community engagement training and facilitated discussion amongst the cohort at large as a module within the Lab's curriculum.

Summary of Recommendations

In order to overcome the affordable housing challenges facing their residents, we recommend that cities:

I. Think big and start small: Scale engagement plans to be realistic, with a focus on building relationships with one or two stakeholder groups.

II. Create brave spaces: Experiment with multiple new strategies to allow for all stakeholders to share their lived experiences freely and with confidence.

III. Communicate clearly and effectively: Create and maintain new communication pathways by using plain language and drawing connections between housing concepts and stakeholders' everyday experiences.

IV. Compensate communities for their time and expertise: When stakeholders engage with cities, they are giving their time and expertise. This should be considered a form of labor and compensated as such.

V. Utilize engagement as community-building: Community engagement empowers communities by building their capacity to support future work and counterbalance regressive or exclusionary voices.

VI. Evaluate engagements to foster incremental change: Tracking and documenting quantitative and qualitative data can build support for further action.

how can we build a more just and inclusive city?

What does a diverse and inclusive neighborhood look like to you?

What are two things about your neighborhood that you want to keep? Two things you want to change?

Let's Meet + TALK!

BAN PLASTIC GREEN CITY GARDENS

APARTHEID DOESN'T WORK

EQUAL HOUSING FOR ALL

"I came to New York and lived in Harlem ever. I love being a lesbian in New York City because you can be free to be who you are. I can be me in Harlem. If a person asks me my preference, I tell them. Everyone in my neighborhood knows and loves me."

SEGREGATED HOUSING SUCKS

"I would like more sign language access, more focus on the needs of deaf people, and the intersection of all people without... means having... can discuss..."

AFFORD

CULTURE DIVERSITY

"I don't want... burdened...
...ing, and not live... to paycheck."

Introduction to Community Engagement

Thoughtful, inclusive outreach, and engagement should lead to outcomes more in line with community aspirations and values. But it's complicated; frequently, priorities and goals are at odds with one another, and community planners must navigate and balance these disparate goals.

Deep, authentic engagement can take months or years and can be blamed for slowing development., In some areas, market-rate development must account for required engagement processes set in place by local governments, and market-rate housing subject to inclusionary requirements can take even longer. This sometimes leads to efforts to shorten the development timeline by removing engagement processes from it. For example, in New York City some policymakers are pushing to "streamline" development approval by eliminating engagements and environmental review because they blame these processes for slowing down the building process and exacerbating the housing crisis.

In the case of housing, many municipalities grapple with constant pushback from communities to prevent new development and experience ongoing crises related to housing scarcity. Engagement is therefore an opportunity to deliver development by educating, building trust, demonstrating respect, and organizing and mobilizing support.

The quality of development and programs can also improve when engagement is more comprehensive and robust because decision-makers learn the intricacies of their community's goals and priorities. Community engagement can also help set expectations and create a baseline while providing insight into how people perceive change, while shared sets of values and principles developed through engagement can better guide change. Finally, new and unexpected ideas can enrich designs, plans, and policy.

Working with the Network, HST heard many perspectives on how localities used engagement and discussed different perspectives on how to better develop and implement engagement strategies.

Community members review posters with maps and other contextual information about their neighborhood.

Left: Community members engage with an activity wall on the sidewalk in their neighborhood.

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Peer Cities: What We Heard

When we asked the Network cities about their existing engagement practices — in addition to seeking feedback and gathering input to inform plans, programs, or policies — trust-building emerged as a leading goal for engaging with communities. Interviews and site visits were the most common methods of engagement deployed by cities in the Network, followed by surveys and focus groups, workshops, task force or advisory committee meetings, summits, and information sessions. Overall, Peer Cities were interested in developing strategies to deepen and strengthen their engagement with residents, developers, and lenders. At the same time, many felt that their engagement with other government agencies, elected officials, and community-based organizations was already strong.

engagement fatigue

meeting stakeholders where they are

government rigidity

misinformation

asking the right questions in the right ways

NIMBYism

stakeholder time and willingness to participate

staff bandwidth & capacity

clearly communicating complex topics

The greatest barriers cities in the Peer Cities Network face in engaging with stakeholders.

Residents — 54%
Housing developers — 46%
Lenders/financial institutions — 46%
Other government agencies — 23%
Community-based organizations — 23%
Elected or appointed officials — 15%
Other (i.e. business owners) — 15%

Percentages of Peer Cities respondents who, when surveyed, identified various stakeholder groups as key engagement targets.

Guiding Principles

HST develops engagement strategies to embed community ideas, needs, and priorities into urban planning work. To ensure robust and authentic engagement, we use guiding principles to build quality outreach and participation strategies.

Inclusive

Elevate the voices of communities that have been systematically excluded from power and possibility.

Respectful

Don't give without taking. Honor the time, wisdom, and energy of community members.

Innovative

Use engagement as an opportunity to think outside the box and discover new ways to communicate with communities.

Contextual

Familiarize yourself with community contexts and build on them. Be aware of and build on past initiatives and engagements.

Grounded

Understand how communities have been impacted by past policies and practices that have caused harm and trauma.

Accountable

Follow through with any commitments you make.

Transparent

Clearly communicate what is being decided, how those decisions will be made and who is making them to foster trust.

Generative

Engagement must be generative, not extractive. Don't take without giving; create clear feedback loops.

Community members attend a community fair to learn about changes happening in their neighborhood.
Photo credit: David A. Quiroga of SocialJack Media.

Community Engagement Strategies

Community engagement can mean a lot of different things to different people. In addition, the goals, methods, and stakeholders that municipalities seek to engage can vary greatly.

Standard forms of engagement, like town halls, presentations, and community meetings, often see participation from an active and vocal subset of residents. Those with a surplus of time and resources are privileged by these engagement methods, resulting in an over-representation of stakeholders that skew older, wealthier, and whiter. Therefore, developing and implementing new engagement strategies is critical to reach communities that have traditionally been excluded from engagement and planning processes.

Conducting community engagement can be challenging, especially considering the barriers stakeholders and municipalities face. At the city level, a lack of resources and capacity can make it difficult to communicate complex topics clearly and meaningfully engage with stakeholders. Even when cities engage with stakeholders, rigid processes can make it difficult to implement what communities want. For stakeholders, there is often very little time and willingness to participate in engagement processes, and previous attempts to participate may have left communities feeling fatigued and distrustful. In this report, we review key strategies that can begin to overcome these barriers and create generative, meaningful engagement opportunities.

Left: Neighborhood residents contribute to a community mural activity.

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Ignore

Deny access to decision-making processes.

1

Inform

Provide the community with relevant information.

2

Consult

Gather input from the community.

3

Involve

Ensure community needs and assets are integrated into processes and inform planning.

4

Collaborate

Ensure community capacity to play a leadership role in implementing decisions.

5

Defer to

Foster democratic participation and equity through community-driven decision-making.

Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership. Developed by Rosa Gonzalez and Facilitating Power.

Spectrum of Community Engagement

Throughout this work, HST and participating cities referenced and discussed the Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, a tool developed by Rosa Gonzalez of Facilitating Power.[1] The Spectrum charts a pathway to strengthen and transform our local democracies. Thriving, diverse, equitable communities are possible through deep participation, particularly by communities commonly excluded from democratic voice and power. The stronger local democracies are, the more capacity they can unleash to address the toughest challenges and the more capable they are of surviving and thriving through economic, ecological, and social crises.

The Spectrum was particularly useful for assessing current community engagement efforts across stakeholder groups and setting goals for how they can advance along the spectrum toward greater and more authentic community engagement, particularly as a means to build support for and make decisions about affordable housing. HST facilitated discussions and workshops leveraging the Spectrum to discuss the types of engagement teams have had experience with, what tactics could be more effective with various partners, and how we might develop an engagement strategy that weaves several touchpoints into a larger campaign.

In working with the Peer Cities Network, we focused on the Consult, Involve, and Collaborate levels of engagement. Many municipalities identified that they often Ignored or, at best, Informed communities of their work, so striving to achieve engagement at these three levels would represent a shift away from "business as usual" and towards modes of working that would bring in community voice, build relationships, shift power, and create processes that would allow for more collaborative decision-making.`

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1   https://movementstrategy.org/resources/the-spectrum-of-community-engagement-to-ownership/

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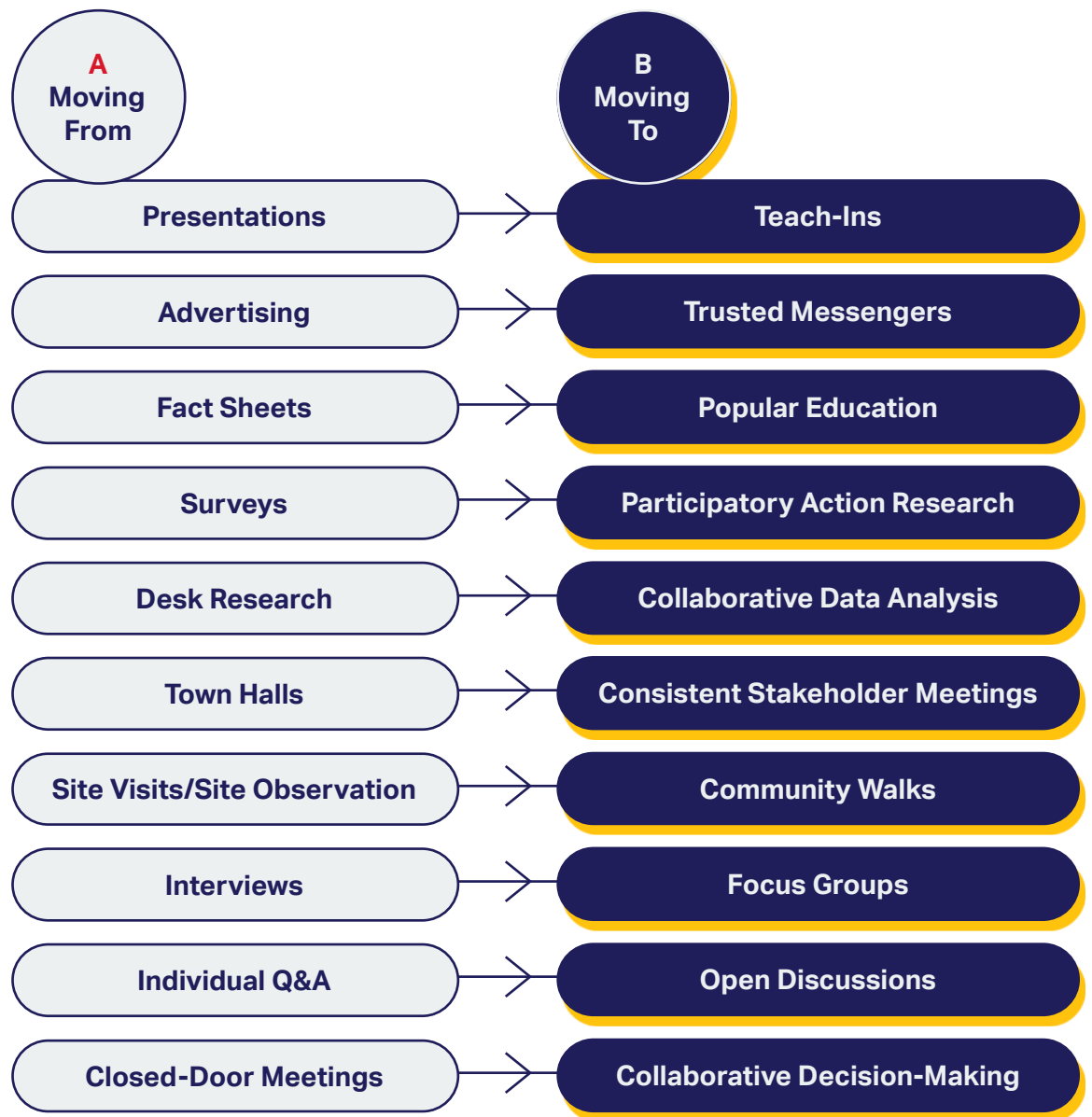
Building an Engagement Process

Community engagement is often talked about as discrete moments whereby city officials engage with stakeholders. However, these events unfold over time, and an effective process requires weaving multiple engagement methods with various stakeholder groups into a cohesive strategy. In this section, we'll provide an overview of what engagement strategies might look like at the Consult, Involve, and Collaborate levels of engagement.

Successfully implementing community engagement processes will push cities to shift towards implementing new tactics and strategies. As cities build their capacity and deepen their relationships with communities, they will begin to move away from traditional practices, which often privilege one-way flows of information and hierarchy, and towards more collaborative, generative, and accessible modes of engagement, which foster discussion and shared decision-making and flatten hierarchies.

See Appendix A for more information about the engagements listed under Column B.

A Moving From	B Moving To
Presentations	Teach-Ins
Advertising	Trusted Messengers
Fact Sheets	Popular Education
Surveys	Participatory Action Research
Desk Research	Collaborative Data Analysis
Town Halls	Consistent Stakeholder Meetings
Site Visits/Site Observation	Community Walks
Interviews	Focus Groups
Individual Q&A	Open Discussions
Closed-Door Meetings	Collaborative Decision-Making

Phases of Engagement

Community engagement processes must be responsive to several factors. Community needs and barriers to engagement, project conditions, legislative requirements, external timelines, and the availability of resources, expertise, and capacity to engage communities will all play an important role in shaping the engagement process. As such, no two processes will look the same.

To structure this discussion of engagement strategies, we'll talk of various phases of engagement that every process will likely go through.

Though these phases are presented linearly, in practice, engagement processes are non-linear and iterative. They require the project team to take feedback, reflect, revise its strategy, and backtrack.

Plan
Define project goals, opportunities, and parameters, identify stakeholders, and prepare to engage with communities.

Outreach
Establish communication channels between the project team and relevant stakeholder groups.

Engage
Collect quantitative and qualitative feedback from various stakeholders during the Engagement Phase through various methods.

Synthesize
Review, synthesize, and summarize data into key findings, themes, and action items.

Implement
Incorporate findings into the project, plan, or process. This might include developing pilots, which can be evaluated through further engagement processes.

Residents of a Council District in Brooklyn engaged in conversation about what they'd like to see in their community.

Consult

Consult is a level of engagement where decision-makers, typically public or private institutions, gather input from the community. This may be accomplished through activities such as focus groups, public comment sessions, forums, surveys, and other data collection methods. Insight and data gathered are then used to inform an approach that considers community input.

Consultative processes allow for the two-way exchange of information. Well-designed processes and touchpoints can inform community members and give decision-makers a platform to learn about community priorities and challenges. They also provide community members a chance to influence decisions, which can help generate trust in public processes and build support for projects and programs. While this level of engagement may not provide deep insights, it can be conducted relatively quickly and requires fewer resources in terms of staff, time, and funding.

While engaging a community through a consultative process may strengthen outcomes and build support for projects such as housing developments, it also presents limits and challenges. Often, many decisions driving projects are made before engagement processes even begin, and they appear perfunctory. In these instances, community members or stakeholders can feel they are being engaged to "check a box." In fact, there is very little opportunity for building consensus or community organizing, which are hallmarks of deeper forms of engagement. If there are already low levels of trust between parties, a consultative process is generally not a productive approach.

Consultative processes tend to be simpler, produce quicker results, and consume fewer resources — especially time, cost, and staff capacity — and are thus more easily replicable. Because community stakeholders are typically not involved in the engagement design process, an engagement activity can be designed once and then undertaken with multiple stakeholders or groups. These consultative strategies and tactics may be implemented when design, resource, legal, or other constraints limit the depth or level of engagement. In cases where these restrictions exist, deeper levels of engagement may not be possible and would not necessarily produce different outcomes or influence decision-making, which could lead to fatigue or disillusionment with the process.

Residents of Pomonok Houses vote on what capital improvements they'd like to see in their community.

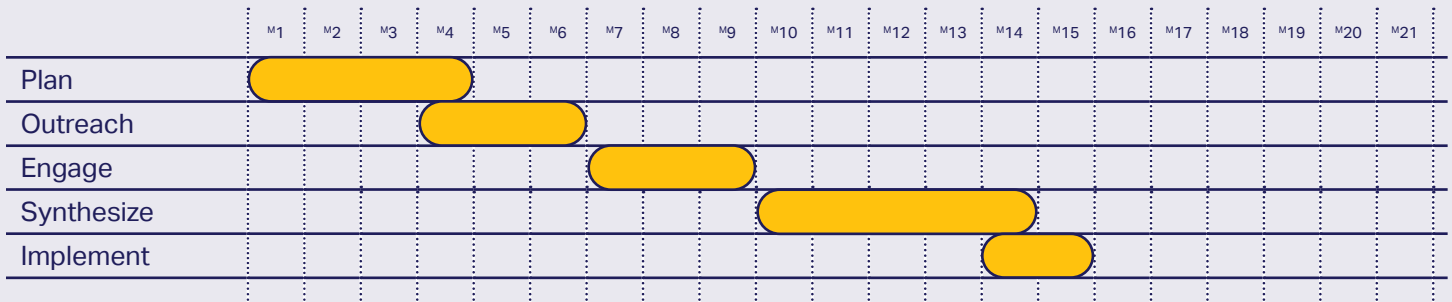< < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < < <

Case Study: Pomonok Houses

Pomonok Houses was chosen as a pilot project for the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Connected Communities Initiative. The overall project seeks to address issues of isolation by working with public housing residents to consider how outdoor spaces in their developments should be enhanced, improved, and designed. The goal is to create more spaces for positive interaction and collaboration and improve residents' overall quality of life.

The engagement process resulted in a selection of resident-identified projects that could be implemented in the Pomonok Houses development to address community needs. A participatory process guided the development and implementation of new basketball courts, a splash pad, and a barbecue area were chosen for implementation. Other capital improvements are part of an action plan for the future.

3

Community Walks

6

Key Interviews

40

Surveys

4

Resident Workshops

2

Tabling Events

Residents of Pomonok Houses engaged in conversation while painting a bench.

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20	M21
Plan	██	██	██	██																	
Outreach				██	██	██															
Engage							██	██	██												
Synthesize										██	██	██	██	██							
Implement														██	██						

Involve

Involve is a level of engagement where the community or stakeholder voice is incorporated into each phase of the engagement process. Community members play a role throughout as key partners, rather than existing as external parties who are consulted at key points towards the end of a process. This approach offers stakeholders meaningful voice and the ability to interpret and react to data generated over the course of the engagement.

Engagement strategies that involve community stakeholders provide several opportunities to strengthen outcomes. Decision-makers can begin to feel confident that their choices reflect community needs, priorities, and aspirations. Community members begin to exercise real power over those decisions, especially as they interface more and more through engagement strategies, a process that can generate trust where low levels exist between groups.

Processes that involve the community require more touchpoints with stakeholders, which in turn require greater time and resource allocation to be successfully undertaken. Strategies and tactics that involve communities are less replicable than ones that consult them because stakeholder input influences the design, interpretation, and implementation of the engagement strategy in iterative ways throughout the process. And, while community stakeholders do have meaningful power within the processes themselves, those voices are not part of the final decision-making authority.

While engaging stakeholders at the Involve level may not empower them to make final decisions, it can generate community ownership over the project. When a project timeline is more flexible, and there are resources and internal alignment around the project's goals and expected outcomes, undertaking longer and more participatory activities such as these can be more impactful. And, because this level of engagement often requires interfacing and communicating through trusted messengers, they frequently unlock greater capacity for public agencies or large institutions to carry out community engagement while building relationships and coalitions.

Residents review maps and data sharing the outcomes and findings of a community engagement process.

4

Partner Trainings

50

Focus Groups

1

Downloadable Toolkit
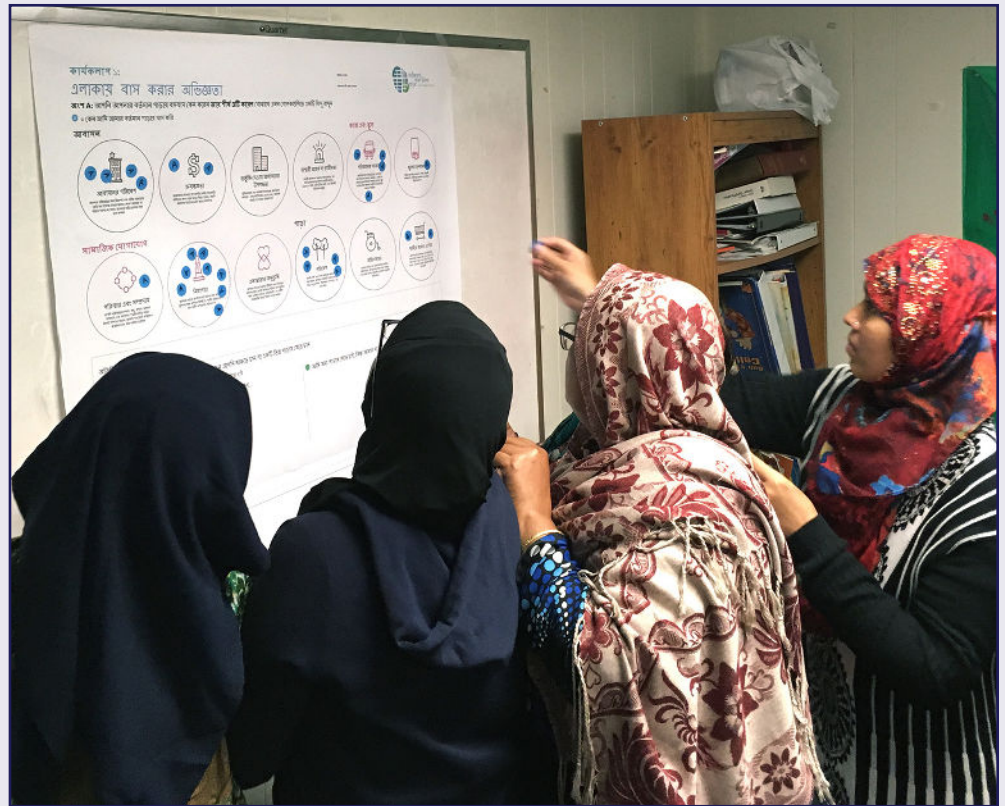
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Debrief Workshops
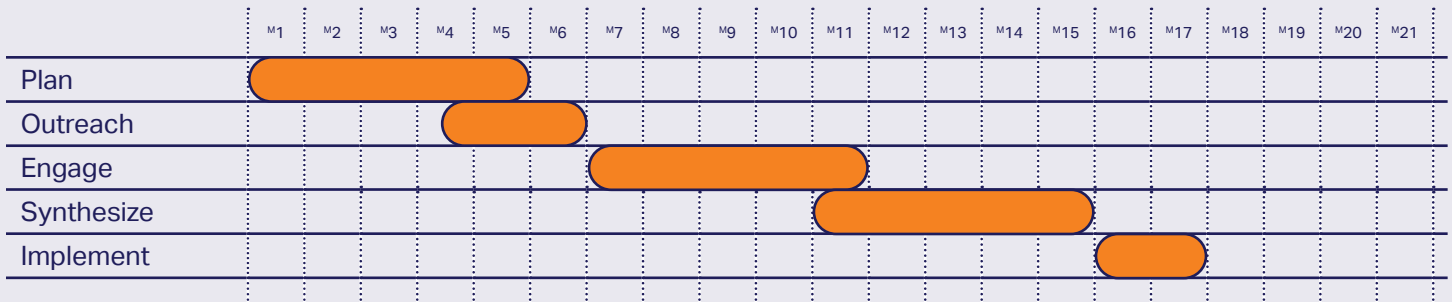
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Expert Roundtables

Case Study: Where We Live

Where We Live NYC is an inclusive, comprehensive, and collaborative process for planning how to fight discrimination, confront segregation, and advance fair housing for all. Where We Live seeks to accomplish this by enabling people to move to their neighborhood of choice or stay in their current neighborhood, even as it changes. The program also seeks equitable investing in neighborhoods to ensure that all communities have the resources they need to thrive.

The Where We Live NYC Plan identified six goals, 19 strategies, and 81 concrete actions to be taken by NYC agencies to advance fair housing. Two years after the conclusion of the process, NYC released a report sharing key updates and progress on the 81 actions identified in the Where We Live NYC Plan. Of the 81 actions, 17 (20%) have been completed and 56 (69%) are in progress.

Community members identify their housing priorities in a workshop facilitated by a local CBO.

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20	M21
Plan	████	████	████	████																	
Outreach				███	███	███															
Engage						███	███	███	███	███											
Synthesize										███	███	███	███	███	███						
Implement															███	███					

Collaborate

Collaborate is a level of engagement where the community or stakeholders take an active role in designing the engagement itself. There is a greater focus on building community and stakeholder capacity for civic engagement, conducting analysis, and exercising power and decision-making. Capacity-building could take the form of encouraging community governance by way of advisory committees, tenant associations, advocacy groups, or other means, and should draw on the unique strengths of the community or stakeholder group. Ultimately, the community or stakeholder group is an equal partner in major decisions. Collaborative processes can often push traditional decision-makers out of their comfort zone; they are designed to empower stakeholders and cultivate community control, distributing power from traditional decision-makers to the community itself.

Engaging in collaborative processes unlocks opportunities to foster relationship-building between government and large private institutions, which traditionally are the decision- makers, and community members impacted by those decisions. Capacity-building and transparent and accessible structures of decision-making can repair and build trust and coalition amongst public officials and members of the community, laying the groundwork for further civic engagement, power-sharing, and community involvement in local issues, the backbone of the best comprehensive plans. And collective responsibility working towards a common purpose can contribute to a sense of ownership of projects and decisions, amplifying their impact. Drawing on the unique attributes of communities, engaging stakeholders at a collaborative level can generate more opportunities to uplift all voices, with particular emphasis on typically underrepresented or marginalized individuals, while uncovering novel and creative solutions for impact.

Collaborative processes frequently push traditional decision-makers out of their comfort zone by design.

Leveraging collaborative community engagement processes can be time and resource-intensive. Capacity-building for power-sharing, data analysis, and decision-making requires a significant technical assistance component to educate and empower stakeholders. Resolving urgent issues then becomes a challenge, since processes can introduce new barriers related to investment and time. It can also be difficult to scope and plan the entirety of the engagement work plan from the start because participants have a significant role in co-creating the process.

Aspiring to collaborate requires patience and comfort in ambiguity, but this framework can effectively engage with issues that involve significant community tension, distrust, and difficult historical context. When there is strong political alignment between public agencies and large institutions, collaborating with community stakeholders can sustain challenging work over a long period of time. A collaborative process can "unstick" issues that previously may have seemed intractable, creating channels for stakeholder accountability to ensure positive outcomes.

A focus group conversation facilitated by a community leader.

29
Working Meetings

1
Mayoral Town Hall

2
Public Workshops

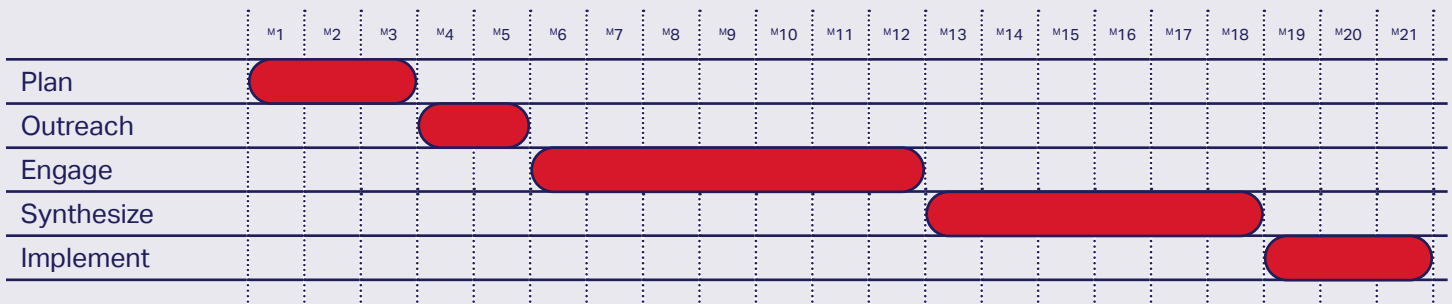## 5
Shareback Sessions

5
Subcommittee Meetings

Case Study: NYCHA Working Group

Following community objection to a draft proposal from NYCHA that considered partial demolition to repair and renovate the Chelsea NYCHA developments, local officials, NYCHA residents of the Chelsea neighborhood in Manhattan, and members of the wider Chelsea community called for additional, and more transparent, community input on any plan to address much-needed capital repairs. Engagement had to reconcile significant deep-seated distrust NYCHA faces from residents. In addition, NYCHA had to confront pushback, concern, misinformation, and conflict over a program to fund repairs by converting Chelsea Houses to Section 8 housing in order to access additional funding.

The Chelsea Working Group developed and approved 62 recommendations related to capital finance strategies, resident rights and protections, and resident engagement. These recommendations provide guidance and accountability as NYCHA and resident associations work collaboratively to address resident needs.

A focus group facilitated with residents of Chelsea Houses.

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20	M21
Plan	█	█	█																		
Outreach				█	█																
Engage						█	█	█	█	█	█	█									
Synthesize													█	█	█	█	█	█			
Implement																			█	█	█

Other Levels of Engagement

Ignore

Communities and stakeholders are ignored when there is no outreach and no possibility for input on decisions. Ignore is most typically associated with the historic marginalization of low-income communities and communities of color, where undesirable activities or infrastructure (e.g., highways, polluting industries) were concentrated despite those communities' objections. Communities and stakeholders are also ignored when their demands for resources and services are unacknowledged and not addressed.

Inform

Inform is a typical baseline level of engagement for many public agencies and officials. Inform encompasses traditional community engagement activities such as town halls or public service advertisements. Information is presented in a one-way direction toward communities and stakeholders, who are not encouraged to offer input. Inform can feel like "checking a box" for community members, often fostering distrust, disengagement, or active backlash. Power over decision-making is held entirely by the public agency or large private institution. Inform is also sometimes used as a strategy to engage with individuals in the community who may participate in engagements in bad faith or who flagrantly violate widely accepted community values.

Defer To

Defer to requires a widespread, sustained investment in the capacity for communities and stakeholders to engage in governance as equal partners. Defer to allows communities and those impacted by decisions to hold final decision-making authority. Defer to is not a "community veto" of projects, but rather the sustained effort to decentralize and democratize governance, decisions, and the allocation of resources to communities, especially those that have been historically marginalized and disinvested. As such, it is difficult to illustrate a Defer to process in a single example of engagement.

Stakeholders shareback their community priority maps.

Engagement Timelines

Engagement strategies built with the intention of consulting stakeholders through focus groups, surveys, and community forums are largely driven by the needs and goals of the internal project team. At this level, engagement touchpoints with stakeholders are limited, and the onus falls on the project team to collect, record, and interpret community feedback. This allows for engagement to be conducted on a shorter timeline, but this also limits the feedback received from community members and constrains the modes of engagement with stakeholders.

Deeper levels of engagement call for involving stakeholders throughout the entire engagement process, from planning and outreach to synthesis and implementation, increasing the time it takes. One approach to achieving this level of engagement is by creating a cohort of key stakeholders to support planning and outreach before wider community engagement occurs. These same stakeholders might also lead engagement activities, leveraging their pre-existing relationships with target communities. Additionally, key stakeholders are involved in data synthesis and implementation, reviewing key findings from engagement activities, and making recommendations for implementation.

At the level of collaboration, stakeholders begin to play a leadership and oversight role in program design and implementation. Therefore, these engagements require frequent check-ins with key stakeholders at every phase of the process. At this stage, you might consider creating a working group to play an advisory role. This working group should receive training from subject matter experts and access to capacity-building resources to engage with the project team as peers. Strategies built at this level of engagement require buy-in from decision-makers, strong stakeholder relationships, and a deep commitment from project teams. This results in longer, sustained processes that unfold over months or years.

Recommendations

Jackson is grappling with multiple intersecting challenges. The region is poised for rapid job and economic growth with the impending construction of the Ford Motor Company manufacturing plant, creating the need to plan for additional housing, especially affordable housing. Jackson also has several districts with housing quality issues among its single-family and small multi-family housing stock. Many of these districts are closest to the downtown area, creating the need to plan for investment without gentrification. Jackson also lacks developers with sufficient capacity to carry out complex affordable housing projects; national and regional developers generally overlook the area.

Other challenges include developing the public financing products necessary to create deeply affordable housing and address housing quality. Jackson has begun to engage with this issue by exploring creating a housing trust fund. Jackson's Peer Cities team also expressed interest in guiding development away from cookie-cutter subdivisions toward developments that better reflect unique local character. Lastly, the state government's general hostility toward urban centers throughout Tennessee strains the relationship it has with Jackson.

The Jackson region also has many strengths. Local government has cultivated deep community relationships and developed the internal capacity, including dedicated staff, to carry out community engagement. Jackson's Peer Cities team also consisted of representatives across the mayor's office, the Jackson Housing Authority, and the United Way, which is indicative of the team's ability to assemble local partnerships to advance capacity-building work. Jackson's Peer Cities team reported that engagement with the community was generally positive, although there was a desire to move away from the town hall meeting and presentation formats, which have innate challenges. They also reported being involved in statewide cross-city collaborations but had not yet seen any major developments from that work.

Residents of NYCHA Chelsea watch a presentation given in multiple languages.

Left: A facilitator engages residents of Chelsea Houses in a discussion about their community.

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I. Think big and start small

Building an effective and inclusive community engagement strategy requires critical systems thinking, patience, and flexibility. Crucially, the most successful engagement work is centered around people, with special attention given to underrepresented communities, and requires building authentic, meaningful relationships throughout the networks we work in. These plans can be demanding to develop and require time and funding — resources that might be hard to come by — because the work is so far-reaching. But taking a long-range view when designing a community engagement plan's frameworks, expectations, and goals will strengthen implementation and set projects up for success.

While it is important to be ambitious with community engagement goals and priorities, it's crucial that work is scaled appropriately to start things off. We recommend identifying one program, plan, or policy to build a pilot engagement strategy around. This pilot should be implemented early enough in developing the program, plan, or policy so that community feedback can be meaningfully incorporated into the final outcomes or deliverables. For this pilot, identify one or two stakeholder groups that you are interested in deepening your relationship with and engage with them using one or two new strategies. By focusing on the relationship-building aspect of community engagement, you can begin to foster connections with communities that will support future work and build your capacity to tap into the knowledge and lived experience of more, and more diverse, stakeholders.

Some community members may distrust government officials due to past experiences or trauma. When there is a lack of trust, it can take a long time to build productive, collaborative relationships. You can start building relationships by working with trusted messengers like community or religious leaders, small business owners, teachers, or family members.

II. Create brave spaces

It's critical to implement new engagement strategies and tactics that allow for the full participation of all stakeholders to share their expertise and lived experience freely and with confidence. Contrary to some beliefs, this does not call for eliminating disagreement (or dissensus), which can be generative and lead to shared growth and learning. Rather, this requires stakeholders to be engaged in ways that allow them to be fully present. This may take the form of community walks, small focus groups, or online engagements that allow for anonymity. It may also require asking questions in new ways, or utilizing trusted messengers who can comfortably meet with participants. Creating spaces where all feel that they can participate fully also requires meeting the access needs of participants, such as American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation, open or closed captioning services, and language interpretation that fosters connection across languages.

III. Communicate clearly and effectively

For all future engagement activities, communication is key. Creating and maintaining new communication pathways is time-consuming and difficult work, but it's time well spent. There are three aspects to effective, clear communication: how you communicate, what you communicate, and who the messenger is.

How: It's important to communicate in ways that community members can understand. Get support from community members to ensure that your communications are culturally appropriate and translated into all necessary languages. A key practice when developing communication materials is to use plain language. Some guidelines for using plain language include avoiding acronyms and jargon, writing for the average reader, keeping words and sentences short, using the active voice and simple present tense, and addressing the reader directly. Using plain language ensures that your communications are easy for

Bringing complex and controversial issues through the community engagement process requires framing and communication that is nuanced, sensitive, and nimble — especially if misinformation pervades the process. The FrameWorks Institute[2] is a nonprofit research organization that provides resources on topics such as framing housing issues.

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2   https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/issues/housing

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everybody to understand and makes the task of translation easier. For some communities, exploring different communication mediums, like videos, posters, podcasts, or comic books may also be worthwhile to get their message across more effectively.

What: What you communicate is just as important as how you communicate it. When developing communications, it's critical to draw a connection to the communities' assets, needs, and concerns. Often, this will require deep engagement to understand what messages will be most effective.

Who: Empower community leaders to share communications with their neighbors. Some community members may distrust government officials and be unwilling to communicate with them. Building the capacity of community or religious leaders, small business owners, teachers, or family members to share your message is an effective way to engage with hard-to-reach populations.

IV. Compensate communities for their time and expertise

When we engage with community members, we are tapping into their lived experience and expertise. This should be considered an act of labor and compensated as such. When you compensate community members for their engagement and participation, you are showing them that you care about their time, and value the expertise and knowledge they possess. Often, compensating stakeholders for their engagement will lead to more active, joyous participation, and can encourage engagement with community members who don't have the resources to engage otherwise. Similarly, for engagement activities that take more time or occur on weekends or in the evenings, providing food, childcare, and access to transportation is also critical to ensure that all are able to participate.

Building and implementing systems that pay community members for their civic participation can be legally and procedurally challenging. A good place to start is to build onto existing procurement platforms or mechanisms. Remember, community stakeholders possess valuable insight and expertise and should be treated the same as any other consultant or subject matter expert.

V. Engagement as community-building

Developing a comprehensive plan for outreach and engagement can be a long, iterative, and unpredictable process. But it can also build the community support and ownership necessary to pull politically or socially challenging — but necessary — projects into reality. Development projects that cultivate freedom of housing choice, and policies that can assure our neighbors have access to safe and affordable homes, are particularly fraught and often emotionally charged. Building trust and nurturing dialogue, while uplifting all community voices, can empower civic participation and anchor community-driven change.

Community engagement processes are not extractive, one-way flows of information. While you are receiving critical information that should guide your planning and program design, equally as important is the capacity you are building within communities to advocate for themselves and shift power. Especially at the Involve and Collaborate levels of engagement, community members who engage with you gain critical knowledge and understanding of government processes and learn how they can continue to stay engaged and advocate for themselves. Build in time within your engagement processes to share information with community members, and build foundations for future learning and advocacy.

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VI. Cultivate your capacity to engage communities

Many aspects of community engagement require learning and cultivating new skills. Facilitation, in particular, is a critical part of any engagement process, but it is rarely recognized as a skill that must be learned and practiced. Too often, facilitation is something that is thrust on unsuspecting or unprepared team members. While some people may be more naturally comfortable conducting community engagements, it's a skill that can be nurtured and improved, like public speaking or active listening. Undertake continued training with subject matter experts to build your capacity to carry out community engagement activities.

Designers and planners are given a community walking tour.

In addition, create opportunities to practice engagement techniques and strategies in low-stakes scenarios and develop on-ramps to build facilitation skills. For example, it's a common practice to give newer team members an opportunity to observe community engagements by having them play a role as notetakers until they feel comfortable facilitating.

Even a modest investment in skills-building will greatly improve residents' experience with community engagement and greatly increase the productivity and effectiveness of your engagements.

VII. Evaluate your engagement to foster incremental change

Begin tracking and documenting quantitative and qualitative data related to your engagement activities to measure your reach and impact. Keep a repository of comments, insights, and findings from across your engagement processes. Regularly compile and update reports on what you heard and share the impact of your engagement activities with elected officials and decision-makers to build support for further engagement and action. ome evaluation questions to keep in mind include:

- How many people did you engage during this process?
- What methods of engagement were most effective in reaching stakeholders?
- Who did you hear from during this process? Who would you have liked to hear from but didn't?
- What's an insight or finding you heard for the first time as a result of this process?
- What key themes keep coming up across your engagement processes?
- What can you do next time to deepen your engagement with communities?

For example, have participants at public meetings and workshops locate where they live on a map so you can see where the people you're engaging live and where you may need to expand your outreach and engagement efforts.

Right: Community members and local elected officials celebrate the opening of a new playground.

Applying these Recommendations

The multi-faceted challenges surrounding housing in the region and the need to prioritize valuable and scarce staff resources to meet those challenges create a strong need for Jackson to develop a comprehensive housing plan to guide future efforts. A comprehensive housing plan will compile existing information spread across multiple reports, assist in dimensioning the region's myriad challenges, and provide recommendations for allocating resources toward meeting them. HST recommends that community engagement be a central element in the development of the comprehensive housing plan. A strong and intentional community engagement component will a) deepen local government's ties to their community, b) build community power and capacity to address challenges, thereby helping alleviate pressure on staff, and c) enable staff to properly understand residents' primary concerns, which in turn also helps to prioritize resources. Robust community engagement can also educate residents on limitations to local government's authority to carry out policy initiatives and open up possibilities for community-driven alternative approaches.

The following table represents a proposal for community engagement that could exist in developing a comprehensive housing plan. HST recommends that Jackson seek to engage residents at the Involve level of the Spectrum. The proposed approach relies heavily on the train-the-trainer model, where staff invests initial time and resources into training community partners who can carry out substantial elements of outreach and engagement. HST recommends this approach, or other similar approaches, to relieve demands on city staff time and resources.

Plan — Set goals of the CHP

Outreach — Build Partnerships

Engage — "Train the trainer" engagement

Synthesize — Review and interpret compiled data

Implement — Incorporate recommendations into CHP

Plan	Activities
Set Goals of the Comprehensive Housing Plan (CHP) *4 months*	1. City staff and consultants conduct initial research with internal partners (e.g., planning department, mayor, and city council) to develop the CHP's general goals and outcomes. 2. Develop an outreach list of community partners (also called "trusted messengers") that will be tapped to engage their respective communities during the CHP process. 3. Develop training materials and resources for community partners.
	Deliverables
	• Key goals and outcomes of the CHP, including the community engagement component • List of community partners • Resource and training materials for community partners

Outreach	Activities
Build Partnerships *2-3 months*	1. Conduct outreach to community partners, including local advocates, social service providers, community-based organizations, and individual community leaders informing them of the project and community engagement goals. 2. Contract with community partners. • *Optional: Project team collects and incorporates feedback from community partners and adjusts goals and outcomes of the CHP → moving toward a collaborative engagement model.*
	Deliverables
	• Executed contracts with community partners • *Optional: Feedback on key goals and outcomes of the CHP*

Engage	Activities
Train-the-trainer Community Engagement *3-4 months*	1. Provide training on the engagement activities, resources, materials, and information gathering necessary to conduct the engagement. 2. Community partners carry out engagement activities among their respective communities, gathering feedback utilizing various approaches (see Appendix A: Community Engagement Activities). 3. Project team supports community partners throughout the engagement process.
	Deliverables
	• Training sessions between project team and community partners • Various metrics of community engagement (number of surveys collected, number of meetings, number of residents engaged, etc.) • Compiled data from engagement touchpoints

Synthesize	Activities
Review and Interpret Compiled Data *2-3 months*	1. Review data in an open, collaborative, and transparent environment. 2. Summarize community feedback in a clear and accessible manner. 3. Present a draft summary to community partners, then finalize the summary based on feedback from those community partners.
	Deliverables
	• Summary of community engagement work • Community-driven priorities and recommendations for the CHP

Implement	Activities
Incorporate Recommenda-tions into CHP	1. Finalize and release CHP. 2. Identify city agencies and external stakeholders responsible for next steps and implementation.
	Deliverables
	• Final CHP • Progress report due at a future date

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Library patrons respond to changes coming to their local branch.

Appendix A: Community Engagement Activities

Card Sorting

One popular method for understanding how participants react to presented information is through card sorting. This process involves writing key terms, concepts, or quotes onto cards and handing them to participants. They are then encouraged to reflect and group the cards based on categories they create. Through card sorting, participants' ideas, themes, and emotional responses can be captured and better understood.This process can also be used to group or synthesize qualitative data into key themes or insights.

Collaborative Data Analysis

Sharing and opening data analysis with community members can help build trust in the engagement process and develop a collective understanding among all parties on how to interpret data.

Collaborative Decision-making

Collaborative decision-making involves building consensus among decision-makers. To achieve this, it is important to introduce and clarify the issue clearly, explore ideas through balanced and equitable discussion, form a proposal, allow for opportunities to amend the proposal, and then test for consensus. If no decision-makers object to the proposal, it is accepted. However, if there are objections, amendments are made until a decision can be reached.

Community Agreements

Ground rules for meetings, workshops, or other discrete engagement activities. Community agreements may be developed by the facilitator or directly by the community members.

Community Walks

A walking tour with community members and stakeholders intended to highlight opportunities and challenges relevant to the engagement project. Community walks typically differ from traditional site visits in that they are community-led and organized.

Consistent Stakeholder Meetings

An essential component of community engagement. Consistent, regular meetings with stakeholders are designed to organize work, build trust and relationships, improve communication, and provide opportunities for community-led decision-making.

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Design Charrettes

Hands-on workshops with stakeholders focused on design, not just consultation. Key activities may include developing working prototypes, role-playing different processes and scenarios, and collaboratively developing new processes or services.

Focus Groups

Conversations with small groups of stakeholders where key questions are asked and participants are encouraged to build upon the comments and ideas of others.

House Gatherings

Intimate conversations with five to ten neighbors in a comfortable, familiar setting such as a home, front lawn, or community park. Hosting these gatherings in comfortable settings not only creates a sense of community and comfort but can also be beneficial in eliciting specific memories or stories and lead to deeper conversations.

Journey Mapping

Participants use qualitative data to visualize how individuals and communities would interact with a proposed project or change to the area. Co-creating journey maps with stakeholders provides a systemic, visual way to understand how systems and services are experienced from the perspective of those who utilize them.

Key Informant Interviews

One-on-one conversations with key informants who have direct experience with the topic at hand, which could include community members, users, program administrators, workers, custodial staff, technicians, or others with direct or indirect knowledge.

Open Discussion

Open discussions provide opportunities for participants to voice their opinions on a wide variety of topics, speak for as long as they'd like, and openly ask questions, which can allow for trust-building and more honest, varied feedback. This form of discussion is less constrained than highly organized formats, where, for example, meeting attendees are only allowed two minutes to voice an opinion or ask a question. As a result, these discussions can be much more challenging to facilitate.

Participatory Action Research

Research methods that center the community affected by decisions within the engagement process. Participatory action research (PAR) can include traditional data gathering methods, such as surveys and interviews, but introduces the following additional steps:

1. Collaborating with the affected community in all stages of the research process. Research subjects assume a collaborative role in the research taking place.
2. Taking actions based on the results of the research.
3. Reflection with the affected community about the outcomes and results of the gathered data.
4. Conducting additional research or taking additional actions as a result of (3). PAR methods can continue in this iterative fashion throughout the project or engagement.

Participatory Budgeting

A form of budgeting where community members decide how a budget or portion of a budget is to be allocated. Participatory budgeting may be carried out by public or private institutions. Decisions may be reached by either surveys, voting, or community member deliberation and consensus-seeking.

Popular Education Materials

Popular education, a key term and practice popularized by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in the 1960s, connects the personal concerns and problems faced by communities with larger systems and policies, thereby inspiring action. In the context of community engagement, popular education materials share information about programs, policies, or plans in ways that connect with the everyday realities of community members. Therefore, creating these materials requires deep knowledge of the most pressing issues and concerns faced by those you're engaging with.

Prototyping

Collecting feedback on concepts from community members using sketches, mockups, low-fidelity models, or role-playing.

Public Workshops

Large events to reach a variety of residents and community members. Public workshops may occur over a long period of time.

Service Mapping

Mapping internal processes and their impacts using qualitative data is accomplished by creating service maps. Service maps help visualize, record, and organize the internal and external processes required to successfully implement a service. Through service mapping, inefficiencies or bottlenecks that are hindering the service's success can be identified and eliminated. Service mapping can also reveal opportunities for additional touchpoints that can enhance the service implementation process.

Surveys

Questionnaires to gather feedback: either written, online, conducted as a street intercept, or by trusted messengers at locations where stakeholders congregate or gather.

Tabling

Attending community events and gathering spaces; using quick activities or questions to gather community feedback.

Train the Trainer

Subject matter and engagement experts train community leaders or other outreach members from outside the organization on how to carry out engagement activities. Train-the-trainer is often used when there aren't sufficient resources to fully carry out an engagement and also as a way to build capacity among community groups.

Trusted Messengers

Individuals or organizations with significant credibility within the community being engaged. Trusted messengers can be used when there is low trust between community members and decision-makers, when there are barriers to communication (e.g., language), and when decision-makers do not have sufficient personnel capacity to carry out the engagement fully.

Working Groups and Advisory Committees

Smaller groups, typically a subset of a stakeholder group, organized around 1) achieving goals for a specific topic (e.g., working groups) or 2) governance and decision-making for the larger group (e.g., advisory committees).

Right: A young resident shares their vision for a climate-resilient waterfront space.
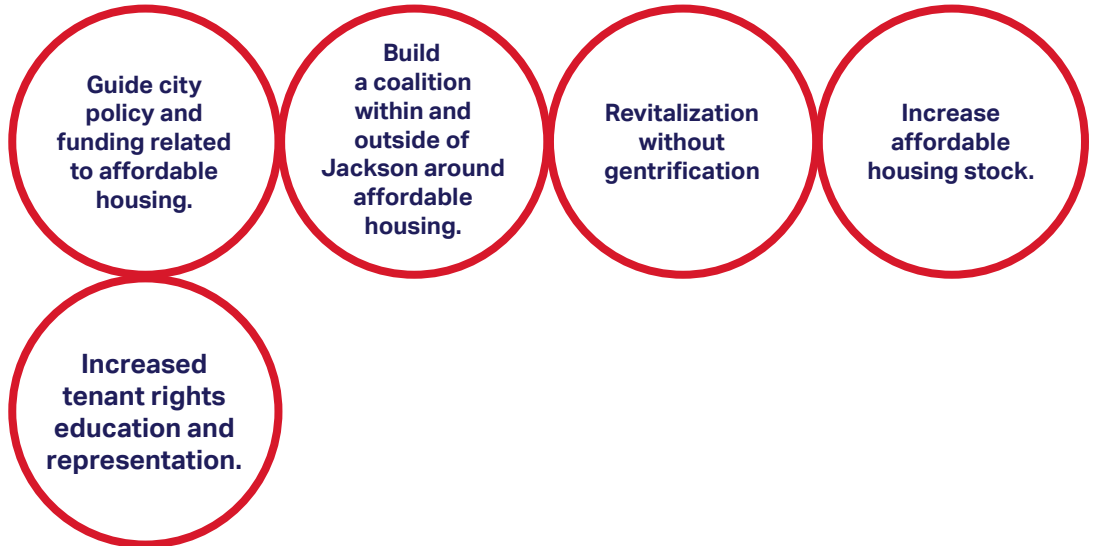

Appendix B: Jackson Backcasting

Hester Street worked with the Jackson team to map out a long-term vision for Jackson and determine the role engagement can play in the near-term.
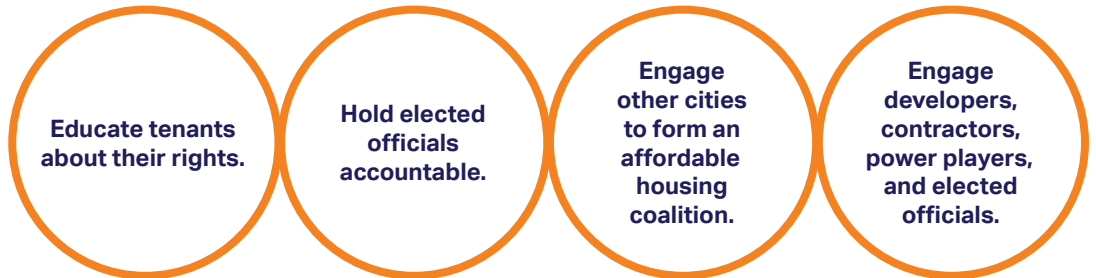
Goals

What does your city look like in 5-10 years?

- Guide city policy and funding related to affordable housing.
- Build a coalition within and outside of Jackson around affordable housing.
- Revitalization without gentrification
- Increase affordable housing stock.
- Increased tenant rights education and representation.

Getting There

What needs to happen to create that future?

- Educate tenants about their rights.
- Hold elected officials accountable.
- Engage other cities to form an affordable housing coalition.
- Engage developers, contractors, power players, and elected officials.

Next Steps

What do we work on now to get us there?

- Create a housing commission.
- Review applicable policy that could be incorporated into housing plan.
- Research affordable housing trust funds.
- Join coalition of other cities to advocate for state-wide policy change.
- Research grant opportunities.
- Host a roundtable of developers.
- Post tenants rights on city website.

Current State

Where are we now?

- Impending rapid jobs and economic growth.
- Several districts with housing quality issues in single- and multi-family housing stock.
- Lack of developers to carry out affordable housing projects.

Template

Backcasting can be used to strategically plan engagements, activities, or actions to take in the near term to achieve long-term visions and goals.

1. Start by describing the current state (at the bottom of the sheet).
2. Then, articulate a long-term vision or goal (at the top of the sheet).
3. Work backwards (from top to bottom) to determine engagements, activities, or actions you can take to achieve that goal.
4. Continue to work backwards until concrete next steps have been determined.

Goals

What does your city look like in 5-10 years?

Getting There

What needs to happen to create that future?

Next Steps

What do we work on now to get us there?

Current State

Where are we now?

Appendix C: Jackson Stakeholder Power Mapping

The Jackson team was asked to list stakeholders that were important to their engagement efforts and map them onto a 2x2 grid, visualizing who is most/least impacted by their decisions, and who they do/don't currently engage with.

These groups are the hardest to reach, but the most important to engage. How might you reach these stakeholders?

Who is most impacted by the decisions you make?

Who are you not reaching?

Who has the loudest voice?

- Employees of local businesses
- Renters/ tenants
- Homeowners
- Families with children
- Local contractors
- Statewide or national contractors
- National developers
- Affordable housing developers

- Planning Department
- Reps of other similar-sized cities
- Peer cities across Tennessee
- Seniors
- Faith-based organizations
- Nonprofit CBOs
- Local dvelopers

- Landlords/ property owners
- City Council
- Mayor

- Financial institutions
- Large employers
- Small employers
- Hospitals (large employer)
- State elected officials

These groups are over-represented in your current engagement processes. How might you counterbalance their perspectives?

Who is least impacted by the decisions you make?

Template

Stakeholder power mapping is an effective way to identify stakeholders, visualize gaps, and determine strategies to engage with communities in deeper, more productive ways.

1. Start by determining the spectrums for the X-axis and Y-axis.
2. Generate a list of stakeholders and arrange them along the X- and Y-axis according to the spectrums.
3. Give each quadrant of the map a name. Identify gaps and opportunities highlighted by the map.

Y-Axis [High]

X-Axis [Low]

X-Axis [High]

Y-Axis [Low]

Appendix D: Jackson Stakeholder List

The Jackson team listed out all stakeholders identified through the powermapping exercise and determined the level(s) of engagement they believe are most appropriate for each. This list can be used to determine the types of community engagement activities and strategies they might implement to reach these groups.

Stakeholder	Ignore	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Defer To
Renters/tenants				●		
Employees of local businesses			●			
Homeowners				●		
Local contractors				●		
Statewide or national contractors			●			
Affordable housing developers				●		
National developers			●	●		
Families with children				●		
Planning Department					●	●
Reps of other similar-sized cities					●	
Peer cities across Tennessee					●	
Seniors				●		
Faith-based institutions				●		
Nonprofit CBOs				●		
Landlords/property owners				●	●	
Local developers					●	
Mayor					●	●
City Council					●	●
Hospitals (large employer)			●			
Small employers				●		
Large employers				●		
Financial Institutions				●		
State elected officials				●		●

Template

When working on a project, plan, or proposal involving different stakeholders, you'll likely need to engage them in various ways. To organize this, you can use a stakeholder list as a tool and follow the Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership as a guide.

1. List all of the stakeholders identified in the stakeholder power mapping.
2. For each stakeholder, determine the level(s) of engagement that feels most appropriate for the given project, plan, or proposal.
3. Review your list and brainstorm how you might engage stakeholders at each level of engagement.

Stakeholder	Ignore	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Defer To
	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○
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	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○