

# TIPS FOR MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This handout was prepared by Coastal Conservancy staff to advance practices that can lead to more meaningful community engagement in project development. Community engagement can come in many shapes and sizes and should be tailored to meet the specific needs of the project and community.

## Why does community engagement matter?

- Ensures the project is aligned with the needs and opportunities of the community.
- Increases the likelihood that project outcomes are widely accepted and successful.
- Creates more effective, informed, creative and practical solutions by drawing on local knowledge from diverse groups.

## What types of engagement are there?

Public engagement can vary based on a project's goals. Below is a spectrum of types of community engagement ranging from low to high level of public impact from community engagement.



Credit: graphic designed by Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), based on the framework developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)

## Who is the “community”?

- Be thoughtful about how “community” is defined and be aware that there are multiple communities in any one neighborhood or around any single issue.
  - For example, a single project might be trying to engage with neighbors, cyclists, birders, non-English speakers, school kids, tribal members, people with disabilities, and others.
- Think about who is participating versus who has not been reached.
- Individuals will participate in the project, not communities. Those individuals may or may not represent the full complexity and diversity of their communities.

## How to structure meaningful community engagement?

- Be willing to not just share information but to **SHARE AND SHIFT POWER**.
  - To arrive at sustainable project outcomes that further equity, those who currently hold power have to relinquish control and co-create projects and project processes with communities involved. This often involves asking and listening to what communities know, want, and need without attachment to preconceived project objectives or outcomes, and valuing community members as experts.
- Consider community engagement not as one directional (informing community of project efforts) or even two directional (inform community and listen in return) but as actively cultivating real involvement and ownership of the project.

**Note to government employees:** As government, we have immense powers, rights and resources relative to most communities and interest groups. Consider how this dynamic affects the type of feedback or responses received (or not received). Ensure that those forms of authority are not abused or overstated.

## Where to start engaging with a community?

- Listen! The first sets of community interactions should focus on actively cultivating meaningful engagement and shifting power *to* the community, eliciting community expertise rather than holding one-sided interactions such as asking a community to attend a session to just listen and learn about an agency or outside organization’s project or vision.
  - What are the communities’ visions for their future? What are the communities’ wants, needs, and priorities? What do community members see as the impacts/issues affecting them? A community’s needs might be larger than, or not directly align with your project, and your original project concept might change after working with the community.
  - Asking community members to spend their own time attending a project meeting makes it critically important to listen, acknowledge, and try to find ways to incorporate their issues, concerns, and priorities into the project design.

- Meaningful community engagement requires sustained partnership with communities. Anticipate that it can be an ongoing process to sustain authentic community engagement.
  - Project-specific community engagement may be impossible without first acknowledging and exploring/addressing the trauma of past experiences across affected communities.
  - Engaging in (possibly very emotional) dialogue on the deeper history of a site/community/issue, may feel far from relevant to “the project” but doing so may be critical to arrive at a functional and equitable path forward.

**Note to government employees:** Government has a long-standing history of using legal powers (such as eminent domain and redlining) to disrupt communities. Even if your agency has not had a history with that community, knowledge of prior government interactions within that community should inform your approach, including any specific lessons learned.

### How can realistic expectations be set and upheld?

- Manage expectations by being upfront and honest.
  - Let participants know upfront of any “non-negotiable” aspects of the project.
  - Be transparent in describing roles and responsibilities, as well as capacities and limitations (especially any financial constraints and time constraints).
- Be accountable and transparent.
  - Continue engaging with community throughout project and beyond. Circle back and create pathways for ongoing communication and feedback.
  - Ensure that promises and commitments made are kept.
  - Make sure to report back project outcomes to the community.
- Value community input.
  - Look honestly and in depth at both what the technical data conveys AND what the community voices. If these are at odds with one another, do not discount the community perspective; it is also critical data, as community members are experts of their community.

**Note to government employees:** Often, there are key legal decision-making milestones for a potential project (such as CEQA document approval, permitting, tribal consultations). Clearly communicate upfront any legal processes involved in the project and how community engagement can interact with those processes (what agency will lead the processes, notice and comment periods, opportunities for exercising legal rights). Clearly share any policies or agreements in place that allow for, or dictate, how an agency receives community feedback. Stipulate if feedback must be provided in a certain form in order to be considered.

### Who leads or organizes community engagement efforts?

- Recognize that staff may not be the right person/group to do on-the-ground convening, though staff can help organize, set-up, and breakdown events.

- Partner with local community-based organizations (for example, advocacy groups, faith-based groups) to lead meetings. If hiring a consultant for community-engagement work, consider also hiring someone from the community, such as a local non-profit organization.
  - Explicitly acknowledge individuals', non-profits, and community-based organizations' time and efforts.
  - Fiscally compensate any and all time and services rendered, even if from a non-profit or community-based organization. Do NOT ask or expect anyone to work for free.
- Diversify the project team; for example, include bi-lingual speakers.

**Note to government employees:** When coordinating with a nonprofit or community leader closely on community engagement, be mindful of potential conflicts of interest (or perception of conflicts of interest).

### When and where to conduct community engagement?

- Incorporate engagement into existing events or meetings, such as community gatherings, neighborhood councils, religious or civic orgs, street fairs, or school events. Go where the community is, rather than making community come to you.
- Consider alternative means of community engagement beyond conventional meetings, such as door to door or online surveys, one-on-one interviews, or small group discussions.
- If a project necessitates holding meetings, consider the following:
  - Host community meetings at the neighborhood-level, not at city-level.
  - Host meetings in locations that are actively used, trusted, and familiar to the community (for example, community centers and churches), as well as accessible (for example, on bus routes or close to metro stops)
  - Host meetings at a variety of times and outside of regular business hours, such as in the evenings or on the weekends—understanding work, day-to-day life, or religious timing constraints for attending meetings.

### What services to provide to increase participation?

- Address language barriers:
  - Dedicate funds in the project budget for interpretation and translation services, production of multi-lingual materials.
  - Use clear language; eliminate acronyms and technical jargon (or define in writing if terms are critical) during meetings.
- Address access barriers:
  - Provide transportation options/support to meetings.
  - Provide childcare services during meetings.
  - Provide stipends for participation as appropriate.
  - Consider providing a variety of food.