

Equitable Engagement for Comprehensive Plans

July 2022



Puget Sound Regional Council

REGIONAL
EQUITY
STRATEGY



The Growth Management Act establishes a baseline for public participation as a component of the planning process. However, many traditional methods and approaches do not facilitate effective engagement with historically impacted communities.

Traditional outreach methods, such as online open houses, public hearings, and online surveys, often only reach a subset of community members. These community members are typically those who are already familiar with the local planning process and have the time to stay up to date with what is happening. As a result, many planning processes fail to adequately consider the perspectives of marginalized communities most impacted by planning decisions. This can lead to additional burdens on impacted communities, exacerbating disparities in the region.

VISION 2050 calls for PSRC to develop a regional equity strategy with tools, resources and strategies for centering equity, including best practices for ensuring equitable engagement. This guide is intended to help local jurisdictions consider new strategies and practices to build a foundation of equitable engagement for 2024 comprehensive planning efforts.

This guide includes four recommendations for conducting equitable engagement: identify communities most impacted, develop public engagement goals and outcomes, establish meaningful relationships and remove barriers to engagement. Each of these considerations includes an explanation, strategies to carry out engagement, and questions to consider. This guide can be used as a starting point for engagement. Resources linked throughout the document provide additional information on carrying out these strategies.



Banner photo credit:

- City Council member Sam Smith. April 1, 1973. Courtesy of the Seattle Municipal Archives, ID 184139.
- Cherry Hill Clean-up Campaign. December 8, 1959. Courtesy of the Seattle Municipal Archives, ID 77421.
- Native American tribes fishing with nets, Bill Elmelund. January 30, 2000. Courtesy of the Seattle Municipal Archives, ID 126754.



Identify Communities Most Impacted



Planning decisions have had and continue to have disproportionate impacts on different communities based on geography, race, ability, and economic conditions. One of the reasons for these disproportionate impacts is that planning processes have excluded or deterred impacted communities, such as communities of color, from participating in planning processes, or have minimized or discounted their feedback in comparison to feedback shared by privileged communities. Moving forward, it is essential to not only identify who and where those communities are that may be most impacted by these planning decisions, but to develop the engagement process with the goal of prioritizing their input.

Using a racial equity lens can help a jurisdiction consider how different groups have faced, and continue to face, different barriers so the jurisdiction can ensure the engagement process engages those most impacted by planning decisions. Not all communities are identified, and have their impacts identified, in common data sources. Relying only on these data sources may exclude individuals who are undocumented and other hidden households. See the Establishing Meaningful Relationships section for strategies to connect with various communities that may not be identified from assessment tools.

Strategies

Opportunity and Displacement Risk Mapping. Opportunity and displacement risk mapping are two related resources that, together, can help identify where in metropolitan areas there is more access to opportunity—things that improve quality of life like housing, jobs, transportation, education, healthcare—as well as areas most vulnerable to redevelopment and displacement. When beginning a planning process, using these tools can help identify communities most impacted by planning decisions, particularly people of color and people with low incomes.

- PSRC: [Opportunity Mapping Tool](#) and interactive Report
- PSRC: [Displacement Risk Mapping Tool](#) and Interactive Report

Equity Impact Assessment Tool. Employing an Equity Impact Assessment Tool throughout a planning process can be very valuable in identifying where impacts are likely to be greatest, who they are likely to impact, and the degree of impact that a project will have on particular communities.

- Government Alliance on Race & Equity (GARE) [Racial Equity Toolkit](#) (2016) – Includes guidance on using a Racial Equity Tool and a set of questions to carry out an assessment.

Questions to Consider

- What are the demographics of your jurisdiction?
- Do the populations you typically conduct outreach with reflect the diversity of the communities you serve?
- Are there areas in your jurisdiction at higher risk of displacement? Could potential planning decisions, such as growth and the implementation of new infrastructure, exacerbate this risk and, if so, who would be most impacted?
- Are there any communities or population groups in your jurisdiction that are experiencing disparities related to housing, jobs, transportation, education, healthcare, etc.?



Develop Public Engagement Goals and Outcomes



Developing public engagement goals will aid your jurisdiction in selecting the best strategies and dedicating the appropriate resources. One key aspect of determining public engagement goals relates to determining the public's role in the public participation process and the amount of impact they may have on a decision. Using a community engagement spectrum to identify the level(s) of decision making you're giving to the public will set clear goals and expectations from the beginning, help you choose appropriate engagement activities and help you identify key engagement milestones in the planning process.

Strategies

Level(s) of influence. An engagement spectrum can be used to establish and communicate clear expectations about the purpose of the community engagement process in question. The levels of public participation on the spectrum are directly tied to the potential level(s) of influence in the decision making process.

- International Association of Public Participation (IAP2): [Public Participation Spectrum](#)

Corresponding engagement activities. Once the level of influence is decided upon for various stakeholder groups or decisions in the planning process, corresponding engagement activities can be chosen to carry out the process.

- Metropolitan Area Planning Council, Boston: [Community Engagement Recipe Book](#)

Providing a feedback loop. You heard great feedback from the community, but now what? Effectively communicating what you heard back to decision makers is a key part of the engagement process. This is critical both for developing a strong plan as well as for maintaining trust with community members. Developing clear documents and presentations that share engagement results, inviting community members to public meetings to share their views, and inviting decision makers to community events are all strategies that can foster effective communication of feedback in the process.

- [Draft VISION 2050 Comments](#) and [Memo to Growth Management Policy Board \(2019\)](#) – Includes an overview of the comments received, as well as detailed information on each comment, response from PSRC staff and process for the board to review comments and take action to revise the draft plan.

Questions to Consider

- What level of decision making are you planning and able to provide to the public?
- What are the key milestones for decision making in your update process, and can the public feedback be incorporated at those points?
- How much will your public engagement plan cost, including any compensation for participants?

Other Resources

- Groundwork USA [Best Practices for Meaningful Community Engagement](#) (2018) – Includes tips for engaging historically underrepresented populations in vision and planning.
- IAP2 [Public Participation Toolbox](#) – Information on various techniques for public participation.
- Snohomish County Light Rail Communities: [Results from Public Outreach](#)



Establish Meaningful Relationships



Engagement does not begin and end with a single project or plan. Successful engagement means building a foundation of trust and collaboration with communities prior to seeking input. It also means valuing the time people give and making it clear how community input will influence or shape decision making. Taking steps to establish meaningful, long-term relationships with communities impacted by planning decisions pays future dividends and ensures the voices of impacted communities are integral to the process. Including these voices could lead to stronger outcomes for all community members and more buy-in down the road from community members and decision makers.

Strategies

Community Advisory Committees. Planning processes typically involve input from numerous boards and committees composed of elected or appointed officials and planning professionals. Often missing from this process are the voices of community members, particularly those representing historically marginalized communities, who are typically most impacted by planning decisions. Creating a standing committee composed of individuals who can speak to their community's needs, challenges, and opportunities can help create a meaningful, long-term relationship between local governments and communities. The expertise that comes from this lived experience can address potential gaps a jurisdiction may have, help avoid unintended consequences, and provide a more holistic understanding of problems and potential solutions.

- [PSRC Equity Advisory Committee](#) – a cross-sector working group composed of residents as well as governmental and community-based organizations representing BIPOC communities. Co-creates products with staff and the Executive Board and advises PSRC committees and policy boards on policies and programs with an equity lens.
- [MRSC Advisory Boards and Commissions](#) – Provides a basic overview of local government advisory boards, task forces, commissions, and committees in Washington state, including relevant statutes and local examples.

Compensation. People from or who represent historically impacted communities provide valuable perspectives and expertise that is often missing in planning processes. Providing financial compensation not only honors that expertise but can also remove major barriers to participation. Multiple local jurisdictions in the central Puget Sound region have adopted, or are considering, policies to allow for the compensation of community members who serve on advisory committees, focus groups, or participate in the planning process in other ways.

- [PSRC Compensation Policy](#) and [Equity Advisory Committee Member Compensation FAQ](#)

Questions to Consider

- In what ways are you dedicating funding and staff time towards establishing relationships with community groups?
- How are you valuing people's time, effort, and expertise? How are you removing barriers to participation?

Other Resources

- PSRC TOOLBOX Peer Networking Series: [Equitable Engagement in Comprehensive Plans](#) – Oct 29, 2021
- [PSRC VISION 2050 Youth Engagement](#) – Spring 2019
- City of Seattle Comprehensive Plan: [Partnerships with Community-Based Organizations, Community Liaisons](#)



Remove Barriers to Engagement



A public engagement process may not successfully capture the full range of community concerns if it does not include multiple ways to participate. While in-person events, like open houses and workshops, can be helpful in communicating plans to the public, they rarely allow for all members of the community to engage with planning staff and voice concerns. Too often, these events are held in places that are inaccessible and/or at times that are unavailable to large groups of people, particularly those who already face barriers to participation (e.g., those who have conflicts with work, those who are unable to secure childcare, or those with disabilities or who face language barriers.) Going where historically impacted communities are, partnering with community-based leaders, providing accommodations to ensure events are successful, and providing multiple ways to participate can go a long way towards ensuring an equitable public engagement process.

Strategies

Make public meetings accessible. Many factors prevent certain people or groups from being able to attend and participate in public meetings. Meetings held at specific times may exclude people who have work or family obligations. Meetings held in specific locations may present challenges for people with limited transportation options or who face geographic barriers. How accessible a location or building is can determine whether someone with a physical disability can attend. Making public meetings as accessible as possible, with as many accommodations as possible, is a necessary component of an equitable engagement process.

- Mobility for All [Inclusive Planning Toolkit](#) – Guidance on planning for accessible meetings.
- PSRC's [Coordinated Mobility Plan \(CMP\)](#) outreach – PSRC staff worked to increase accessibility for CMP virtual outreach meetings. For example, staff sent accessible presentation materials prior to meetings, developed multiple ways to provide feedback, ensured virtual closed captioning in all meetings, and provided a process for requesting accessible accommodations, such as American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation in advance of the meetings.

Provide multiple ways to participate. Social, economic, and cultural conditions, as well as differences of ability, can influence how people prefer to communicate and interact with others. When it comes to planning processes, planners should be mindful of this and ensure there are multiple ways to provide input and participate. Some may prefer to attend a more traditional open house, where they can interact with staff directly. Others may prefer to engage via an online open house or simply provide comments on their own. Having a better understanding of limitations to online access for different households can help tailor these approaches.

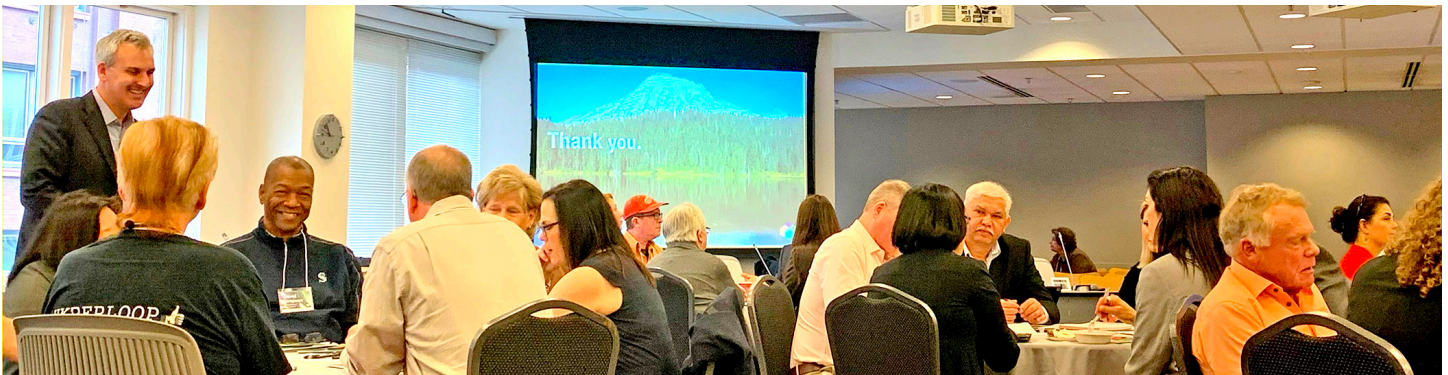
- PSRC Regional Transportation Plan [survey, interviews](#) and [focus groups](#) – In 2021 PSRC conducted an online and telephone survey for the Regional Transportation Plan. Selected participants were invited to take part in follow-up surveys and focus groups to share more information on their experience with the transportation system.
- City of Bellevue 2044 Comprehensive Plan: [Preliminary Community Engagement Report Phase 1](#)

Tailor outreach to preferences of identified communities. A big factor that can limit public participation is the fact that outreach and marketing strategies often fail to capture the ways specific communities get their news. Relying entirely on big conventional sources to get the word out about a project may be more efficient, but doing this can lead to a lack of diversity of thought and experience. Ensuring materials are available in different languages, communicating using mediums preferred by communities, and utilizing a mix of marketing resources are effective ways to help incorporate a diverse range of perspectives in a planning process.

- [MRSC Youth Participation in Local Government](#) – Provides examples of Washington state cities and counties that have established youth councils, commissions, and other programs to encourage teenagers and young adults to participate in local government.
- Pierce Conservation District’s [Harvest Pierce County Program](#) – Cultural Ambassadors Program pays bilingual, bicultural community leaders to help ensure programming is reflective of and responsive to community members in the county. The program’s ambassadors have helped co-create programming in Vietnamese, Khmer, Spanish, Russian, Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Korean.
- King County [Language Access for Limited English-Speaking Populations](#) – Includes guidance and tools for accessible communication to individuals with Limited English Proficiency and barriers to communication.

Questions to Consider

- Are you providing accessible information and marketing materials in multiple languages and through a diverse array of sources?
- Are you holding meetings/open houses in a variety of accessible locations and at different times of day?
- Are you providing amenities like childcare at public meetings?
- Are you facilitating different methods of providing input to account for social, economic, and cultural differences?



The considerations and resources included in this guidance document are meant as a starting place when considering an equitable approach to community engagement. These resources have been generated by PSRC staff with input from PSRC’s [Equity Advisory Committee](#). PSRC is available to connect planners to local resources and provide more information on the information provided in this document.



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