



INSIGHT

## Five simple steps to successfully engaging with the public

Public involvement is the process of actively engaging the public in decision-making and providing opportunities for them to influence decisions that affect their lives. This process helps project decision makers understand the affected stakeholders' needs, expectations and aspirations. By empowering people to connect through the public involvement and engagement process, the project team can effectively share information and receive feedback, helping ensure the delivery of critical projects and initiatives. The following is a five-step guide to plan and execute an entire phase of public engagement, from the very first brainstorming session to completing the summary and reflecting on what was heard.

### **Step 1: Define the project and community, and build a community profile**

- Defining the project and community establishes the core message and the intended audience. This includes summarizing the project, defining engagement goals and determining the communities of focus for

engagement.

- Building a community profile explores who lives in, works in and frequents the communities selected for engagement and which groups within those communities might require particular attention in planning engagement. This includes collecting information, taking stock of what was learned and following up on findings.

For example, during a project at Park Lane and Fair Oaks Avenue in Dallas County, Texas, the project area was very densely populated. Bartlett & West and the County created a community profile to pinpoint the people who would be most impacted. This allowed the project team to receive comments and opinions from those who were most directly affected, which helped the project be more concise and beneficial.

## **Step 2: Determine involvement needs and plan involvement opportunities**

- Determining the involvement needs helps the team identify specific considerations, accessibility and/or special requirements that need to be accounted for when planning engagement opportunities. This includes language needs, disability and accessibility, other communities to consider and controversial projects and histories.
- Planning involvement opportunities utilizes the knowledge from the previous steps to design engagement opportunities to fit these factors. This includes determining types of opportunities, choosing locations and venues, selecting dates and times, planning for needed staffing and preparing engagement materials.

While working on a project at Paisano Drive and Montana Avenue Corridor Study located in El Paso County, Texas, the project team identified a large Spanish speaking population, which led to materials translated and published in Spanish newspapers, as well as include Spanish speakers at public information events.

## **Step 3: Plan and implement informational and engagement activities**

- Planning and implementing informational and engagement activities begins the process of communicating the opportunities to the public, using what you've already learned about the community in previous steps. This includes determining types of engagement activities, preparing communication materials, collaborating with partners and planning to collect data.

For example, Bartlett & West's 360 Tollway Extension Project located in Ellis and Johnson Counties, Texas, was a huge project that was in its early stages with a large affected property owners list. The project team created a flyer distribution list and posted the public information opportunity in the surrounding community instead. This allowed the client to broadcast the opportunity to the public, while only directly inviting elected and political officials. In turn, this allowed for impactful comments from interested civilians and community leaders in the beginning of the project designs, which grants the project team time to better define the proposed project.

During the I-70 Polk-Quincy project in Topeka, Kansas, the design and public engagement process began during the Covid pandemic. Therefore, the project team utilized a project website, e-newsletters and even a virtual public meeting to keep people informed. In addition, while the project had potential impacts on the entire community, area businesses and residents along with community leaders were key stakeholders. Therefore, the team kept a list of those stakeholders for mailings, emails and individual stakeholder group meetings. This allowed them to provide input on the future design of the project, such as additional lighting to enhance safety and visual appeal of the viaduct.

## **Step 4: Hold involvement opportunities**

- Holding involvement opportunities is the accumulation of all information from previous steps and implementing them into an opportunity that holds space for conversation, information and application. This includes preparing for anything, arriving early and inspecting, setting up and preparing and brief/debriefing.

The Paisano Drive and Montana Avenue Corridor Study required the Bartlett & West project team to travel to El Paso from Dallas, meet with the TxDOT El Paso District to gather materials, and then coordinate bringing all materials to the public information meeting.

Bartlett & West also worked with the South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources on a statewide public information campaign related to lead service line inventories for water systems. For that project, the team presented information to water system staff across the state through in-person and virtual training meetings. Those meetings helped inform the systems of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requirements related to the inventory work, while also refining and rolling out the public information campaign to those systems' users, which included fliers, postcards, social media posts, an informational video and more.

## **Step 5: Summarize and reflect**

- Summarizing and reflecting gives the project team the opportunity to learn from the successes and shortcomings of this round of engagement while also providing a feedback loop with the project team and the public that provided comments. This includes evaluating your outreach and sharing what was heard.

During the US 281 Hamilton Relief Route Feasibility Study and Widening project, located in Hamilton County, Texas, Bartlett & West received 72 comments after the first public meeting. The project team put them in a Comment-Response Matrix and addressed each concern and opinion with project engineers. This resulted in narrowing down alternative choices, better defining project study lines and improving relationships between project engineers and affected property owners.

In conclusion, public involvement is a rapidly growing and ever-changing process that is key to ensure accurate, timely and productive conversation between the project team and the affected public population. Using these five steps to engage the public during major milestones throughout a project life cycle creates efficiencies and proactively manages public involvement risks that are costly and time-consuming when they occur at later stages in project development.