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City Leader Guide on Civic Engagement

Designing Pathways
for Participatory Problem-Solving

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the many city leaders and experts in civic engagement whose experiences and insights informed this guide during the research phase:

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Bloomberg Harvard City Leader Guides

City Leader Guides offer:

- Analytic tools to diagnose and remedy a particular problem by asking the right questions, looking at the right data, making the right process decisions, and considering the right strategic alternatives.
- An overview of promising practices in other cities.
- Relevant insights from the academic and practitioner literature integrated with desk research and interviews.
- Approaches to assessing organizational readiness, avoiding failed adaptation of practices, and navigating stakeholder engagement and implementation challenges.
- Supporting materials to aid in further exploration, deliberation, and decision-making.

A City Leader Guide is not:

- An academic paper that answers a research question by presenting evidence.
- A policy paper that prescribes solutions or advocates for a specific set of practices.
- An endorsement of a particular set of “best practices.”

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative produces City Leader Guides to:

- Improve the problem-solving capabilities of cities; we aim to equip city leaders and their staff with tools, frameworks, and knowledge to address challenges.
- Facilitate the diffusion of innovative practices and exchange of experiences in the global community of city leaders.
- Fill a gap between the academic literature (typically heavy on analysis and light on actionable advice) and “best practices” databases (typically heavy on practical examples, light on analysis).
- Support city staff, technical assistance providers, and students working with cities on complex policy challenges by offering a structure for diagnosis and planning.

The intended users of a City Leader Guide are:

- **Mayors and city managers:** an executive-level summary of the guide helps them decide if they want to commit to the work and provides questions that they can ask to prompt and gauge progress.
- **Senior officials** (e.g., department heads, chiefs of staff, senior advisors): the executive summary, diagnostic framework, and promising practices presented help them understand the approach and supervise staff, students, or technical assistance providers.
- **Staff, students, and others providing technical assistance to cities:** the full guide serves as a resource to structure their work.

To access other guides published through the Bloomberg Harvard City Leader Guide Series, please visit <https://www.cityleadership.harvard.edu/research-and-resources>.

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This is the first version of this City Leader Guide. The authors welcome feedback and will continue to improve and update the guide as they work closely with city practitioners and monitor emerging “promising practices” in cities. Please send your comments to cityleadership@harvard.edu.

Executive Summary

This guide provides analytic tools, insights from theory and practice, and step-by-step process support for city leaders and staff hoping to engage residents in public problem-solving. Rather than endorse a set of “best practices” or prescribe solutions, we take civic engagement as an iterative practice that presents many possible entry points and design choices on the path toward participatory public problem-solving.

The demand for better forms and forums for engagement between city leaders and residents is growing on both sides as the complex, interwoven challenges and crises of the twenty-first century—from housing and public health to climate-related catastrophes and legacies of discrimination—continue to unfold. There are no easy answers to these problems or failsafe methods for working with community members and partners to resolve or respond to them. As with most critical leadership skills, the work of effective engagement is as easy and as hard as committing oneself to ongoing practice and learning in a spirit of inquiry and humility. The guidance offered here, grounded in theory and practical frameworks, grew out of dozens of conversations, workshops, and consultations with mayors, city leaders, and expert facilitators and practitioners who have seen engagement efforts fail many times over—and learned what it takes to succeed.

This guide can support city leaders, community partners, staff, students, and others providing technical assistance in creating civic participation processes that help address the critical challenges cities face today. Specifically, we provide the following:

- 1 A “**participation pathways**” framework to help city leaders and their partners evaluate their civic engagement efforts and design opportunities for exchanges and collaborations that produce desired outcomes for and with the public.
- 2 A **self-assessment tool** to help city leaders understand the historical context for their civic engagement efforts and assess the efficacy of previous and current endeavors.
- 3 Examples of **promising practices** from cities around the world—i.e., well-designed engagement efforts that align with the desired outcomes.
- 4 Guidance on **how to design, implement, evaluate, and improve** civic engagement programs.
- 5 An **accompanying workbook** to help you work through and evaluate your engagement processes.

The universe of civic engagement resources, examples, and methods is growing rapidly, and it is easy to get lost in the weeds or grab hold of the nearest shiny object. The guidance provided here is intended to help you ground your practices in the essential goals of engagement and the fundamental design questions relevant to every engagement effort.

The Participation Pathways Framework: People-Powered Problem-Solving

The art and practice of civic engagement is an essential function of democratic governance. Our working definition of civic engagement, while not exhaustive, encompasses a wide range of ways in which city leaders can engage residents in the work of public problem-solving:

Civic engagement in cities is the process of including the voices, ideas, and capacity of residents in the work of democratic governance. This includes opportunities for co-governance between public officials and residents beyond what the law requires.

In 1969, Sherry Arnstein’s seminal [framework](#) on engagement, the “Ladder of Citizen Participation,” challenged government leaders to examine existing efforts to engage communities: do residents truly get a chance to participate in the work of political decision-making, or are engagement practices a form of tokenism, or worse, manipulation? These questions are still relevant today. Extreme inequality, low trust in government, and high expectations regarding services make civic engagement a moral, political, and practical imperative for city leaders.

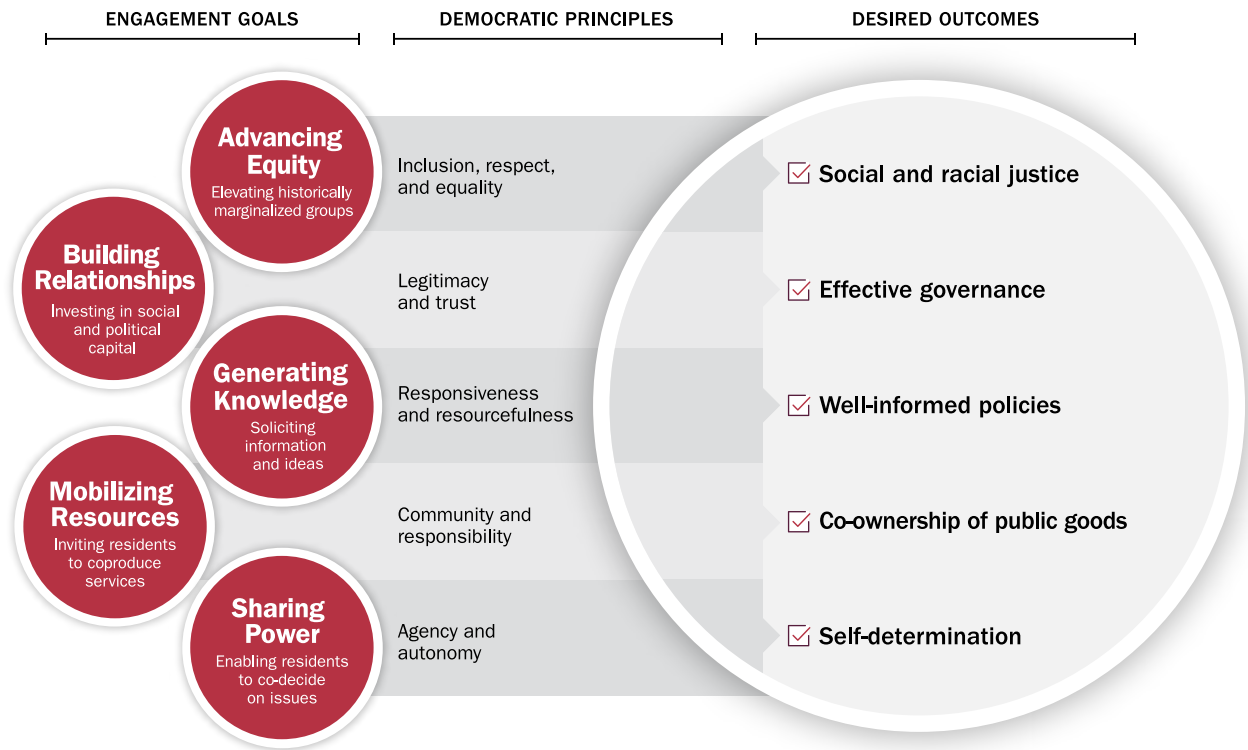
This guide builds on Arnstein’s insights by offering a framework for analyzing and fostering different kinds of constructive civic engagement and public participation. There are many possible pathways to improved public problem-solving with residents and other local stakeholders. Being clear about why you are engaging them and how much power or influence you are willing to share is critical in designing engagement efforts. It is not just the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. Poorly designed engagement efforts can be worse than no engagement at all because they often backfire, resulting in disappointment for all parties involved. Well-designed civic engagement efforts are clear about the goals of engaging residents and structured to accomplish those goals.

Based on a synthesis of the literature on participatory democracy and an assessment of the challenges facing city leaders in the 2020s, we examine common engagement pitfalls, offer practical guidance, and share insights from efforts in five cities on three continents.

The Democratic Goals of Civic Engagement

We begin by clarifying the objectives of engagement. The framework below distinguishes five goals that may motivate city leaders to engage the public, each rooted in distinct democratic principles and connected to particular desired outcomes as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1
Five Democratic Goals of Civic Engagement



Advancing Equity

Including and elevating historically marginalized groups in pursuit of social justice

Engagement efforts may focus on establishing and promoting equity, not only by expanding the diversity of representation, but also by ensuring equitable treatment and procedural justice, reducing inequality in material conditions, building underrepresented residents' civic power, and affirming their dignity and autonomy through inclusion in decision-making processes.

Building Relationships

Investing in social and political capital to enable effective governance

The goal may be to move beyond transactional relationships with residents and local stakeholders and forge meaningful connections with individuals and across sectors to instill a sense of community, build trust, shore up civic infrastructure, and engender public support for local government and policies.

Generating Knowledge

Soliciting information and ideas to create better policies

City leaders may seek to utilize the personal experience and expertise of individual residents and local stakeholders to inform and contribute to policymaking—for example, using survey feedback to improve services, crowdsourcing solutions to specific problems, and learning about the lived experiences of residents to create more just social conditions.

Mobilizing Resources

Inviting service coproduction to boost public spirit and shared responsibility

City governments may ask residents to contribute their skills and time to help produce public goods and services as a way to support the implementation capacity of resource-constrained city halls, instill a sense of ownership and community in neighborhoods, and help city service delivery better fit local needs.

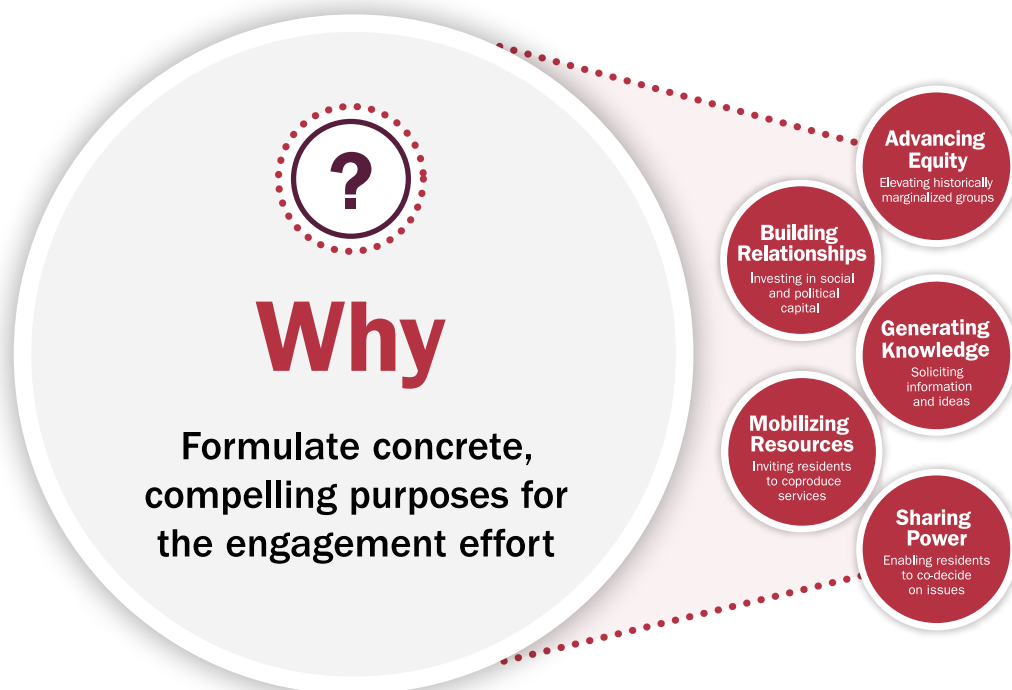
Sharing Power

Enabling residents to co-decide on issues to express respect and promote agency

City leaders can create opportunities for residents to co-decide on matters of local public policy. Sharing decision-making power with residents and giving them an opportunity to see their choices translate into concrete results can help build civic power and a sense of self-determination.

These goals are not mutually exclusive; often there are several goals associated with an engagement effort. Being clear about the priority goals, the underlying values, and the logic connecting them to desired outcomes allows city leaders to design engagement processes more intentionally and communicate the goals of engagement more clearly. If leaders are asking the public to participate in achieving shared objectives, they must be able to articulate a compelling and coherent reason *why*. (See figure 2.)

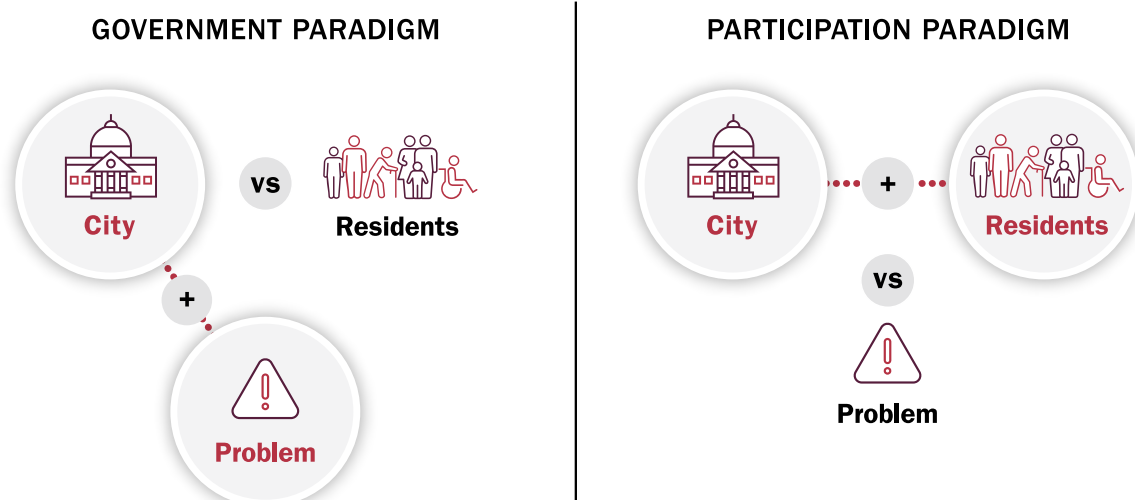
Figure 2
Understanding "WHY"



Avoiding Common Pitfalls: Four Questions

While there are some technical problems that city government may be well equipped to address without extensive engagement, there are precious few public problems that city government can solve all on its own. The conventional government paradigm, in which cities set and enforce policy with limited public input, tends to pit city against residents, us vs. them. Residents complain about the quality of the services their governments provide or resent the burdens they impose; they refuse to comply; they protest existing policy and resist change. City officials are indifferent, bureaucratic, and inflexible; they have no understanding of residents' experiences, expertise, and needs. Or so the usual story goes. An orientation to public problem-solving that centers city government as the decision-maker and positions residents as obstacles rather than thought partners and coproducers leads to poorly designed engagements. Interacting with citizens as collaborators rather than adversaries can lead to more mutually satisfying and productive engagement. (See figure 3.)

Figure 3
Two Paradigms of Public Problem-Solving



Most city leaders have no trouble coming up with examples of efforts to engage residents that did not produce the desired results: a big forum to discuss the future of the city where nobody showed up, a town hall meeting about new parking policies that devolved into a shouting match, an online event where public officials spoke at length without hearing from community members, or a neighborhood meeting that surfaced some great ideas nobody took the initiative to implement.

There is no simple recipe for success in civic engagement, but getting clarity on purposes and key design considerations can help city leaders avoid pitfalls and disappointing outcomes. When engagement efforts fail, it is often because the engagement itself was not designed to align stakeholder input with desired outcomes. Arnstein's [participation ladder](#) highlighted the importance of being clear about the amount and form of power leaders are willing to give to or share with residents, but this is just one of several critical design questions. Many efforts fail or disappoint because city leaders go into the engagement with incomplete answers to four critical questions.



Asking “Why”: Aligning and Identifying Problems and Solutions

Why are we asking residents to participate? Broadly speaking, is the goal to build relationships, generate public knowledge, share decision-making authority, mobilize resources, advance democratic equity, or some combination of these five?

Clarity and transparency about the problem the engagement is trying to solve and the desired outcome are critical. Articulating the problem and defining what success in addressing it might look like will inform the design of the engagement initiative and can help motivate participation from both city government and residents.



Asking “What”: Understanding Residents’ Role

What is the subject of the engagement? Is it an open-ended topic like envisioning the future of the city? A technical issue like planning new traffic patterns? A policy change that affects families, like altering school hours or closing a school? A justice-oriented goal like eliminating police brutality? What is the problem you are asking residents to think, talk, or do something about?

Clearly defining the scope of the topic being discussed and the role that residents will play is crucial. It is important to frame the subject in a way that matches participants’ local expertise.



Asking “Who”: Including Essential Voices

Who will be asked to participate? Are you aiming to engage a broad cross-section of the community or (more often) a focused subset of residents, such as people in a particular neighborhood, parents of schoolchildren, etc.? Do your goals for the engagement suggest you should involve particular civic or community organizations, and, if so, which organizations and what actors within those organizations do you want to engage (their presidents and directors, their staff and frontline workers, or the individual community members they serve)? How will you make the process accessible for those you wish to engage?

Bear in mind that successful engagement builds *with*—not *for*—the community. Without understanding and including those who will experience the effects of the policies under consideration, civic engagement efforts may create unintended consequences. City leaders must strive to involve all stakeholders and affected parties, understand barriers to participation, and work to overcome them. Too often, it is the “usual suspects”—the most interested, advantaged, and engaged residents—who show up to participate. What have you done to overcome the “usual suspects” pattern?



Asking “How”: Choosing the Right Tools and Methods

How will participation be organized and sustained? What measures will you take to ensure legitimate and informed decision-making? How will you set and meet reasonable expectations? What process considerations and follow-up efforts will be necessary to maintain trust and achieve desired outcomes? What are you asking residents to contribute to the process: what type of input, how much time, what kind of actions?

Local leaders have a wide range of mechanisms to choose from, including but by no means limited to citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, and e-democracy. (For links to online inventories of engagement methods and tools, see “[Determine Your How](#)” in Part III of this guide.) Public officials should be able to articulate how and when the public will be involved and design effective processes to meet the stated goals. These processes should be transparent, produce concrete results, and make efficient use of the public’s time.

Figure 4
Four Essential Design Questions



The four questions described in figure 4, like the five goals outlined above, are interrelated and overlapping. While each may be difficult to answer completely in isolation, failing to consider any one of them—and their implications for the others—can create major challenges for civic engagement efforts.

The Imperative for Equitable Civic Engagement

The 2020s began with a pandemic, a recession, and a renewed cry for racial and social justice in cities across the United States and the world. Residents are asking their local governments to address bigger problems with fewer resources, expecting them to innovate and adapt to ever-changing circumstances. City leaders need to maintain legitimacy and build trust in an era of political polarization, rampant misinformation, and growing public anxiety. They need to mobilize communities to support, augment, and coproduce city services. And in everything they say and do, they must prioritize the inclusion of historically marginalized groups in the community and work in partnership to counteract deepening social, economic, and health disparities.

Thoughtful, well-designed processes and mechanisms for civic engagement can help make our cities more responsive, inclusive, adaptive, and better prepared to meet these daunting challenges. They can also save city government time and money—and, most importantly, improve social outcomes.¹ While these benefits are nice to have in the best of times, they can be crucial in the worst. During a crisis, a resilient civic infrastructure enables faster and better emergency response, policy execution, and inventories of conditions on the ground.

Building this infrastructure means placing equity considerations in the foreground of every engagement process and coming to the table with humility, empathy, and a commitment to listening. America's legacy of systemic racism in particular—the deliberate exclusion of Black, indigenous, and immigrant communities from political and economic power—requires city governments to make concerted efforts to include people of color in civic processes and decision-making as a matter of racial justice. (For definitions of racial equity, racial justice, and related terms, see [Race Forward](#).)

While civic engagement can lead to more equitable and just outcomes, poorly designed engagement can have the opposite effect, worsening inequities and further eroding public trust. Often, for disenfranchised and marginalized communities, civic engagement efforts occur within institutions associated with centuries of systematic mistreatment. Furthermore, many traditional civic engagement models, whether by accident or design, are less effective at realizing democratic ideals than consolidating and maintaining the power of the privileged.

The guidance offered here can help city leaders design more mutually satisfying and equitable engagement processes that acknowledge power differentials among participants, accommodate intersecting marginalized identities, and value knowledge and expertise of all kinds.² For more on designing for equity and inclusion, we recommend [The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement: A Guide to Transformative Change](#) by Kip Holley of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. (An overview of Holley's six principles appears on page [44](#) of this guide.)

Civic engagement is no panacea for the challenges of twenty-first century governance, and it is hard to get right. But it is more essential than ever for city leaders to strengthen the relationship between government and residents, to tap into the expertise and creativity in their communities, to mobilize the capacity needed, and to live up to one of the fundamental values of democracy: equitable participation.

Using this Guide

This guide's intended audience is city leaders and staff seeking to build more equitable and effective civic engagement efforts in their cities. You can use the guide in pieces or its full sequence. It is structured as follows:

Section Title	Process	Framing Questions
Part I: Self-Assessment	Understanding Your Context: Historical self-assessment	What have our civic engagement efforts looked like in the past? Why have some of our city's past civic engagement efforts been unsuccessful?
	Identifying Strengths and Areas for Improvement: Development rubric	What does our civic engagement look like today? What are our goals, motivations, and rationales for engaging? Where should we focus our efforts in order to improve?
Part II: Promising Practices	Exploring the Framework: Examples of civic engagement efforts	What does successful engagement look like? What practices have other cities successfully implemented and what informed their design choices?
Part III: Designing Your Civic Engagement	Using the Framework: Planning and aligning your design	How can my city apply this design framework to build a custom engagement plan? How can we increase the likelihood that the design achieves the desired outcomes, including equitable representation?
Part IV: Implementation and Evaluation	Implementing Your Design: Understanding challenges, iterating, and learning	How can we overcome common roadblocks and challenges? What tools and tactics will advance our goals? What can we do to harness digital technology, counter misinformation, and build and maintain trust internally and externally? How can we track progress and measure success?

The background of the page is a detailed, light-colored architectural floor plan of a building complex. It shows various rooms, corridors, and structural elements, all rendered in a fine-line style. The plan is oriented diagonally across the page.

Part I: Self-Assessment

Part I: Self-Assessment

Phase one of this assessment will help you to understand the historical context of civic engagement activities in your city. Phase two provides a rubric to assess where your engagement efforts stand today. Rather than suggesting a comprehensive investigation of all past and current examples, we offer this exercise as a scaffold to support internal and external discussions during planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Historical Context

Each city is unique, with its own historical and ongoing political, economic, and social realities that will affect civic engagement activities and outcomes. Understanding this context will allow you to identify opportunities and anticipate challenges for civic engagement efforts and design accordingly. This section will help you reflect on the historical context of civic engagement in your city. You can use these questions (or variations on them) for surveys, interviews, and conversations with residents and community stakeholders, and for meetings and exercises with your team. You may use the accompanying workbook to respond to the questions or adapt them and create your own worksheets.



In the past, have residents had power to participate in public problem-solving?

1. If not, why not?
2. If so, how frequently has the city engaged residents?
3. How satisfied have city officials been with civic engagement efforts?
4. How satisfied have residents been with city hall's engagement efforts?
5. What do the most satisfying engagement efforts have in common?
6. What do the least satisfying engagement efforts have in common?
7. What differences have you observed in how different residents tend to engage?
8. Who has shown up and who has not?
9. Who has had voice and who has not?



Why has the city engaged residents and community stakeholders in the past?

1. What motivated the engagement effort?
2. How did the city define successful engagement?
3. How did residents and stakeholders define successful engagement?
4. What did the city want to accomplish that it could not accomplish without civic engagement?
5. What kind of assistance did the city seek from residents (e.g., time, input, resources, expertise, etc.)?



What have been subjects of civic engagement in the past?

1. What subjects, policies, or political decisions has civic engagement focused on in the past?
2. Who has typically nominated and defined the subject for civic engagement?
3. How broad or narrow have the topics of engagement been?
4. In what areas of politics, policy, or decision-making have residents *not* had input?
5. Were the subjects of civic engagement efforts relatable to participants and aligned with their expertise?
6. Did residents have access to accurate data, information, and context to participate in an informed way?



Who has been engaged in the past? Who has not?

1. In city-led engagement efforts, has the city reached out to residents in general, to specific groups of people, or to organizations representing specific groups?
2. How does the demographic makeup of those engaging with city government compare to the demographic makeup of the city in terms of race, gender, age, income, education, geographic location, immigration status, and other variables?
3. Which community leaders, business associations, voluntary sector organizations, or activists have traditionally been most frequently engaged, and how representative are they of the city as a whole?
4. What constraints, limitations, or barriers has the city encountered in efforts to engage particular audiences or groups?
5. During these engagement opportunities, who represented city government? Were the decision makers present?
6. Did residents have power to design any part of the engagement?



How has the city engaged residents in the past?

1. What tools has your city used to engage residents in the past?
2. How have residents responded to those tools?
3. Were the engagements managed and moderated by city officials or outside facilitators?
4. What worked or did not work about the moderation?
5. Did residents or community groups have a role in managing or facilitating events?
6. In what ways did the city respond to residents' feedback, concerns, and ideas during and after these various efforts?
7. How were actions and outcomes communicated back to the public?
8. What types of channels did the city use to communicate, invite, and alert residents and/or partners to engagement opportunities (e.g., social media channels, in person, websites, press releases, etc.)?
9. How did the city make this information accessible to various audiences (e.g., translations, digital, paper, etc.)?
10. Were events accessible to all residents?
11. What measures were taken to ensure accessibility?



Have residents engaged the city in the past?

1. What mechanisms and structures have been available for residents to initiate engagement with the city (e.g., citizen initiatives, petitions, demonstrations, complaints procedures, etc.)?
2. Have residents engaged with city hall or expressed preferences, concerns, support or dissatisfaction through non-established mechanisms in the past?
3. If so, which residents and community stakeholders engaged the city and on what topics?
4. Were their motivations and demands clear to city government?
5. What were the results of the engagement?
6. How (dis)satisfied were residents and city officials after the engagement?
7. What has the city learned from moments when residents engaged the city?

We encourage including a diverse group of stakeholders in the work of assessing past and current civic engagement, identifying areas for growth, and monitoring new efforts for continued learning.³ This process can be an investment in civic engagement and civic infrastructure building in and of itself.⁴ In addition to generating feedback on your efforts so far, it can help you better understand your city's existing social capital and civic infrastructure; identify entry points for cross-departmental and cross-sector collaborations; and serve as a forum for practicing listening, facilitation, "difficult conversations," and mutual accountability.

Development Rubric

This tool can help assess the state of civic engagement in your city. It can also be adapted to assess particular projects and engagement efforts within specific policy areas.

Who should use this rubric?

This rubric is designed for city leaders and their staff to assess strengths as well as areas for growth. Conversations with residents, partners, and internal stakeholders around some of these questions can generate helpful input or feedback. When completed, the rubric can serve as a baseline to anchor efforts to improve and expand engagement.


What do the terms nascent, intermediate, and mature mean?



The questions in the rubric are not designed to generate precise, objective answers: different people will have different evaluations based on their experience and perspective. The terms nascent, intermediate, and mature aim to capture cities' progression along a continuum of increasingly inclusive, collaborative, and integrated practices of engaging with residents. Your city will likely find it has strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others along the continuum. The rubric will help you see where you have room to grow and deepen engagement.

Nascent: City officials rarely think or talk about civic engagement beyond the legal requirements and consider public problem-solving a task of government employees.

Intermediate: City officials regularly think and talk about civic engagement, but often struggle to design and manage efforts in a way that residents and government entities alike perceive as effective.

Mature: City officials consistently think and talk about civic engagement, design engagements with intentionality, and consistently monitor and evaluate engagement efforts in order to learn and improve. Many residents feel that city government is their partner in making the city work, and vice-versa.

QUESTIONS	Nascent	Intermediate	Mature
 WHY?			
How does city hall define and measure success for civic engagement efforts?	The city is checking boxes and makes an effort only when it is obligated or expected to do so.	There are goals, but they are not clearly defined; the desired impact is vague and there are no metrics.	There are clear, realistic goals and metrics to measure success. There are mechanisms for ongoing learning and improvement.
How do the engagement goals align with city hall's priorities?	It is not clear how goals align with city hall priorities.	In a few areas, engagement goals align with city priorities.	There are engagement goals for all city hall priorities and mechanisms in place to incorporate feedback from engagement in decision-making.
To what extent do residents' concerns and ideas inform engagement efforts?	City hall initiates engagement efforts based on internal priorities and assumptions about resident interests.	City hall initiates engagement efforts in response to resident demand. Residents' concerns, interests, and ideas help shape engagements.	There is deep partnership and ongoing dialogue with residents and organizations representing the full range of stakeholders affected. Resident concerns routinely drive engagement, and both city officials and residents agree on the democratic goals of the effort.
How clear are the city's goals to residents?	City hall asks residents to participate but fails to articulate why it is doing so.	City hall explains why residents' participation is important but often fails to show how engagement results are incorporated.	City hall asks residents to participate, clearly articulates shared goals, and consistently shows how engagements with residents have shaped decisions.

QUESTIONS	Nascent	Intermediate	Mature
 WHAT?			
How much information about the subjects of engagement is available to residents?	Relevant information about the subjects and/or priorities of engagements is unavailable, obscure, or deliberately concealed.	City hall makes some information, data, and priorities available and transparent, but leaves out some relevant information.	City hall makes all the relevant information in its possession available and easily accessible. The city seeks to provide information that residents want, and residents use it. The city incorporates new information discovered through the engagement process.
Who is involved in nominating, defining, and refining the subjects for engagement?	City hall nominates and defines the subjects for engagement with little or no community input.	City hall seeks some community input in nominating, defining, or refining the subjects for engagement.	City hall actively works with the community to choose and refine the subjects of engagement efforts through ongoing partnership and dialogue.
Does the information provided make it easier for residents to contribute meaningfully?	The information provided is not easily accessible or understandable to all residents.	The information provided is accessible and understandable for most residents.	The information provided is easily accessible and understandable to all residents, including non-English speakers, people with impaired hearing or vision, and residents with low levels of education.
 WHO?			
Who is being engaged?	People who voluntarily seek out opportunities for civic engagement.	People who voluntarily seek out opportunities for civic engagement plus some people from underrepresented groups contacted through city hall outreach.	Residents who have learned of opportunities for civic engagement through active outreach from city hall and strong partnerships between city government and community-based organizations.
How diverse and representative is the group of residents participating in engagement efforts?	City hall engages mostly with a fairly homogeneous group of individuals.	City hall engages with a somewhat diverse group of individuals.	City hall engages with a very diverse and representative group of individuals in terms of race, gender, age, ability, educational attainment, income, LGBTQ+ identity, geographic location, immigration status, and organizational affiliations.
Do voluntary civic organizations participate in engagement efforts and work with the city to improve them?	Yes, but only occasionally and with mixed results.	Yes, regularly and with mixed results.	Yes, consistently and (despite occasional friction) with a shared goal to engage more residents in meaningful interactions.
Who represents the city in civic engagement opportunities?	City hall delegates civic engagement efforts to lower-level officials and/or third parties.	Civic engagement efforts are the responsibility of higher-level officials who actively participate.	Civic engagement efforts are a priority for city leaders: they consistently attend events and engage actively with residents.

QUESTIONS	Nascent	Intermediate	Mature
	HOW?		
How large is the city's toolbox? How varied are the ways in which the city engages residents?	City officials use only one or two tools to engage residents.	City hall has a handful of civic engagement tools that may or may not complement each other or align with engagement goals.	City hall experiments with a variety of tools and examines processes and outcomes to learn how they complement one another and align with engagement goals.
How does city hall deal with engagement efforts that are initiated by residents or grassroots organizations?	City hall largely ignores these efforts and does not feel bound to do anything with the input.	City hall pays attention but often struggles to engage in a constructive way with these efforts.	City hall appreciates these efforts and actively engages to learn from and harness the ideas and energy of residents.
How does the city incorporate accessibility tools and accommodations to make civic engagement inclusive?	City hall has not effectively or consistently considered accessibility.	City hall makes some provisions for accessibility to make civic engagement efforts more inclusive.	City hall provides robust language services, digital access, and disability access to make civic engagement efforts more inclusive. The city actively works to remove barriers to participation.
Are invitations clear and specific as to what is being requested of residents?	Invitations are vague about topics, goals, and expectations.	Invitations provide limited information about topics, goals, and expectations.	Invitations specify topics, goals, and expectations, including time requirements, available accommodations, and what knowledge, skills, or resources participants should be prepared to offer.
Does city hall support and align engagement efforts across departments?	Engagement efforts across departments are underfunded and uncoordinated.	Engagement efforts across departments are somewhat aligned and there is some dedicated funding.	Engagement efforts are funded and aligned across departments and strengthened through this coordination.
Does city hall incorporate engagement throughout decision-making processes?	Engagement is typically limited to one point in the decision-making process.	Engagement is incorporated in several parts of the decision-making process.	Engagement is consistently and thoughtfully incorporated throughout the decision-making process.
How many channels does city hall use to communicate civic engagement opportunities to residents?	City hall uses only one or two channels to communicate.	City hall relies on a handful of digital and print channels or methods.	City hall employs a wide variety of print, digital, and word-of-mouth channels.
How does city hall handle feedback and communicate outcomes back to residents?	The city does not communicate the outcomes of civic engagement efforts to the public or solicit feedback.	The city communicates outcomes through formal mechanisms like press releases and does not have formal mechanisms for capturing or responding to feedback on process or outcomes.	Residents participate in the ongoing evaluation of engagement efforts and help communicate outcomes back out to communities.

This assessment is a starting point. The accompanying workbook will help you use the rubric to get a baseline understanding of where your city's strengths lie, which common pitfalls have tripped you up in the past, and where to focus efforts to improve engagement in the future. While particular engagements might be time-limited or narrowly defined, civic engagement is an ongoing, iterative process between cities and residents, and continuous learning and improvement are essential for building trust and resilience.

The background of the page is a detailed, light-colored architectural floor plan of a building complex. The plan shows various rooms, corridors, and structural elements, all rendered in a fine-line style. The overall color scheme is a muted, dusty rose or light red, which is consistent with the text color.

Part II: Promising Practices

Part II: Promising Practices

In this section, you will find five examples of intentionally designed civic engagement efforts—from complex, large-scale efforts to create new, participatory models for public decision-making, to narrower, technology-driven efforts to generate critical information. Each city started out with one or two goals in mind and made design decisions and adaptations that helped align the what, who, and how with those goals. These examples also help demonstrate the interconnectedness of the democratic goals of engagement and the ways in which pursuing one goal often simultaneously advances the others. We have highlighted two goals for each example, but you may notice others as you read through.

Civic Bridge in San Francisco, California *Mobilizing Resources and Building Relationships*



Why?

In 2012, the late Mayor Edwin M. Lee established an [Office of Civic Innovation](#) (OCI) with the goal of making city government “more collaborative, inventive, and responsive for San Franciscans.”⁵ The Civic Bridge program, launched in 2015, established a basis for ongoing cooperation and coproduction between city hall and private-sector companies and their employees.¹ Civic Bridge aimed to offer meaningful opportunities for companies and their employees to give back without adding unsustainable burdens to city staff.⁶ Through partnerships with corporations and nonprofit organizations, Civic Bridge created volunteer engagement opportunities for local employees with specialized skills. While the program sought to add volunteer capacity to public problem-solving, OCI staff also took care to build lasting relationships between private-sector volunteers and city hall and to demonstrate the potential for external partners to serve the public and enhance city governance.



What?

In collaboration with OCI, city departments identified problems and proposed projects. Local companies formed volunteer teams to work with city staff to address a wide range of policy problems including, for example, streamlining affordable housing applications, improving communication about homelessness services, managing 911 call surges, and establishing equitable support for small businesses during COVID-19.⁷



Who?

Through the OCI (which eventually moved from the mayor’s office to the city’s technology department), Civic Bridge brought together city staff from various departments and skilled volunteer teams from companies and organizations including Google, Accenture, Fuse Corps, Harvard Business School Alumni, and Adobe.⁸ While some smaller local companies and organizations also participated, transnational companies in particular had the resources to pay employees during their volunteer stints and a large employee base from which to recruit volunteers. This allowed the Office of Civic Innovation to focus on building relationships with companies, rather than on recruiting hundreds of individual volunteers. Where relevant, the Civic Bridge projects also incorporated user research with residents who utilized the services that volunteers sought to improve.⁹



How?

Civic Bridge enabled its volunteers to contribute to city projects within a clearly structured program that matched their skills to a real need in a city department. The structure helped volunteers understand the problem and propose custom solutions. Volunteers typically dedicated eight to ten hours of their time each week over a sixteen-week period.¹⁰ In most cases, volunteers did not build new technology or solutions, but rather set the direction and established project plans for the city to use within the context of broader, longer-term efforts to improve services and address public problems.

¹ Civic Bridge built on similar models out of Chicago and San Jose.

To ensure a good match, partner organizations were invited to choose their top three projects and explain what they could offer. OCI staff then worked with department staff to match volunteers and form project teams; launch the program with a kickoff event; support teams through the discovery, design, and delivery phases of the project; organize an event for teams to share their recommendations; and, finally, follow up on implementation status and communicate impact.¹¹ It typically took about six months of preparation and project design, including running plans through an internal review committee, for Civic Bridge to have a well-scoped assignment for volunteers.¹² OCI acted as project manager and intermediary, facilitating interaction between the volunteers and city departments throughout the project timeline.

Outcomes

Between 2015 and 2022, 861 volunteers from twenty-eight partner organizations had worked more than fifty-two thousand hours on eighty projects across thirty-four city departments, amounting to an estimated \$7.85 million in pro bono work.¹³

Among other noteworthy projects, volunteers with the Civic Bridge team helped facilitate the development of DAHLIA, a web portal that simplified a confusing multi-step affordable housing application process. Today, approximately 85 percent of affordable housing applications are submitted through DAHLIA. Each application takes about fifteen minutes to complete, and over 650,000 applications have been submitted. (The city is able to place fifty households each month.) According to at least one applicant, the new system made the application process less arduous and anxiety-inducing and provided a much more dignified experience.¹⁴

During the COVID-19 era, the relationships built through Civic Bridge paid dividends as corporate volunteers helped city staff transition to remote work, learn new skills, and launch new programs. In a time of decreased municipal revenue and budget cuts, demand for Civic Bridge volunteers increased, and the program expanded dramatically. In 2019, Civic Bridge facilitated five to six projects; in 2021, fourteen projects were completed. The city documented a number of its completed projects in [Civic Bridge case studies](#). The program maintained a relatively high retention rate, with about 60-70 percent of partners returning each cycle.¹⁵

Design Insights

Civic Bridge was designed to engage private-sector and nonprofit partners in more than a one-off relationship. By investing in the design of Civic Bridge and ensuring volunteers were engaged in meaningful work, the process strengthened relationships between city hall and external actors at both the individual and organizational level.

A core design insight along the way was recognizing the need to respect the time and expertise of both volunteers and city workers. At its inception, Civic Bridge's project proposals came from the mayor's office. While this ensured alignment with the administration's priorities, it did not guarantee buy-in from city departments. As the program evolved, OCI embraced its role as intermediary and began to work more directly with city staff to define problems and projects.¹⁶ It also developed standards for choosing and designing projects and implemented a cross-city, cross-departmental peer review process for approving applications. Selection criteria included a clear challenge or problem to solve, potential for impact on the lives of residents, and alignment with the mayor's policy priorities. Building political capital internally in this way before engaging external actors set projects up for success. When designing projects, the OCI considered department leadership's commitment,

whether the project was well-scaled for the sixteen-week engagement period, and the department's capacity to implement volunteers' proposed solutions.¹⁷ The office learned that a successful project requires clear procedural owners and leadership from within the relevant city department.

OCI also built strong relationships by empowering volunteers. OCI workers coached departments not to prescribe a set solution but instead to focus on describing the problem and pain points so that volunteers could develop solutions with fresh perspectives.¹⁸ During implementation, volunteers worked closely with city staff. This helped to ensure that volunteers had the necessary support and information to carry out the project and got timely responses to obstacles that arose.¹⁹

To avoid conflicts of interest and ensure the legitimacy of the process, program policies stipulated that volunteers contribute work that differed from their company's core product. This was especially important because many of the companies involved were also vendors for the city and partners in other respects. In coordinating these projects, Civic Bridge partnered with social impact or employee engagement teams, rather than production departments.²⁰

Important motivations to start the program were the opportunity build better relationships with the private sector and mobilize private sector capacity to help solve public problems. Carefully selecting which problems to work on and with whom, being respectful of the time and expertise of volunteers, and following a consistent process helped achieve these goals. When COVID-19 hit, companies offered help and expertise to city hall at a time when local governments everywhere were struggling to navigate an unprecedented crisis. Cities of Service at Johns Hopkins University has made the lessons learned from Civic Bridge available online, [with step-by-step guidance](#) for other cities.

Flint Property Portal in Flint, Michigan

Generating Knowledge and Mobilizing Resources



Why?

City officials in Flint, Michigan, were struggling to keep track of a large and growing number of distressed properties. Like many “rust belt” cities, Flint's population had been declining since the 1970s due to deindustrialization and “white flight.” By the mid-2010s, 30 percent of properties stood vacant. A state-appointed emergency manager's cost-cutting decision had contaminated the city's water supply, creating a public health crisis that shattered public trust and raised concerns that more residents would leave.ⁱⁱ With so many unoccupied homes across the city, public officials struggled to establish and share up-to-date information about property status and neighborhood conditions.²¹

Amid these challenges, the city approved [Imagine Flint](#), a twenty-year master plan for land use with a focus on neighborhood revitalization. Resident input during the planning process confirmed that the community recognized addressing distressed properties as a top priority.²² To implement these plans effectively, however, city officials needed more insight into neighborhoods and properties, and they needed residents' help.²³

The [Flint Property Portal](#), launched as a mobile app and website in 2017, allowed residents and community groups to share detailed information on property status that the city could use to realize the goals of Imagine Flint through data-driven decisions and informed policy choices.

ⁱⁱ In 2013, the city began piping inadequately treated water from the Flint River into homes and businesses, causing widespread lead exposure and possibly triggering an outbreak of Legionnaire's disease.



What?

In 2014, the city planning department released “Beyond Blight,” a framework for addressing distressed properties that estimated the cost of remediating vacant and neglected properties at \$108 million.²⁴ Following a recommendation in “Beyond Blight,” the city established the Property Portal. For the first time, community members could easily report property condition changes from their phones or computers, providing vital information for local government workers, boards, and community organizations. They could also use the Portal to view information pertaining to plans and opportunities for improving properties, such as volunteer clean-ups; demolition status; lot adoptions, leases, or sales; and future land-use designations from Imagine Flint.²⁵

This new tool brought in information from people who previously would not have known how to report or get information about distressed homes. Officials encouraged residents to fill gaps in data about property status and use the portal as a tool to take action in their own neighborhoods. In the process, they hoped to strengthen engagement, transparency, and trust between residents and local government.²⁶



Who?

The Genesee County Land Bank—a county authority with a board and a citizens’ advisory council that accepted properties after tax foreclosure and made decisions about the management, improvement, demolition, and sale of thousands of vacant and abandoned properties—partnered with the city to develop the Portal.²⁷ Four local grant-making organizations provided funding for the development of the Portal.²⁸ Residents (as well as city and Land Bank workers) provided information on properties in their neighborhoods by sending messages through the Portal to update property status and track maintenance activities.²⁹ The Land Bank shared information on the actions planned or taken on properties, including designation and schedule for demolition or the sale, adoption, or leasing of properties held by the Land Bank.



How?

During outreach meetings to share and solicit community feedback on the Flint Planning Commission’s blight elimination framework, residents asked for a more transparent system for viewing information on property ownership and status and gathering and sharing property condition data. Based on their suggestions, the Genesee County Land Bank and the city launched the [Flint Property Portal](#), enabling residents, city and Land Bank staff, and community organizations to look up and contribute to user-generated information about properties and view data held by both the city and the Land Bank.³⁰ The city and the Land Bank used data collected through the Portal to inform planning and decision-making.³¹

The Portal was built on data from an existing project called the Flint Neighborhood Inventory as well as other city and county data systems. The beta version was launched in early 2017 and presented for testing to institutional partners, community group leaders, and residents. After the Portal’s official launch, the city and Land Bank held trainings for residents. For each property, users could access forty data points, including information on property ownership, building condition, occupancy status, zoning district, demolition status, and more. They could also view photos and send updates on up to twenty property-specific data points as well as upload their own photographs and maintenance reports. The database was searchable by map or parcel ID number. Users of the Portal could view pre-made color-coded maps with frequently requested data (e.g., properties for sale, demolition status, property condition, etc.) or create their own maps targeting specific neighborhoods or types of data. Local organizations played an active role in using and promoting the Portal, and city and Land Bank representatives shared user guides and hands-on support and demonstrations at community and neighborhood events.³² The city and the Land Bank used data collected through the Portal to carry out their day-to-day work as well as to inform planning and decision-making.³³

Outcomes

Less than two years after the launch of the beta version, residents had sent nearly 120,000 messages through the Portal, with city staff adding another seventy thousand, filling in previously missing data on the status of all fifty-six thousand properties across Flint.³⁴ The Land Bank and city departments used the Portal to inform water service line repair, review permit applications, plan for demolition and renovation, and retrieve data on property conditions.³⁵ Flint leveraged these short-term benefits into longer-term engagement and positive change for Flint neighborhoods. In a 2021 survey of residents, more than half of the respondents had participated in some kind of distressed property remediation. The Land Bank's Clean & Green program engaged community members and youth in more than thirty thousand mowings of neighboring yards annually.³⁶ The reliable geographic data from the Portal also allowed the city and the Land Bank to implement more strategic blight elimination and helped them secure new funding from outside agencies. In partnership with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, the Neighborhood Engagement Hub, Huntington National Bank, and others (including the Land Bank), the city established the Flint Home Improvement Fund in 2021, offering local homeowners low- or no-interest loans for home repairs.³⁷

Design Insights

Through the Property Portal, the Land Bank and the city were able to obtain essential, actionable information from residents, but the Portal was just one feature of a broader effort to engage the community in the work of addressing distressed properties. The city relied on residents to provide information that would help government staff and officials make decisions about actions to take on properties. Valuing residents' opinions and expertise on conditions and land use in their neighborhoods helped create trust between residents and decision makers. Resident-generated information formed the basis for a more equitable and inclusive planning process.

The Flint city government, Genesee County Land Bank, and other partner organizations emphasized the need for frequent engagement with residents to mitigate suspicion and make clear that the city and the Land Bank prioritized resident input and involvement in land use decisions and activities. Iterating as they went along, the partners created both formal and informal modes of engagement, from information sessions to orient residents to the Property Portal and its uses to providing parcel surveyors with identifying signage designed to spark conversation and awareness among onlookers.³⁸

Another key design insight was that implementing a set of standards for parcel surveys not only simplified and streamlined the process of gathering and tracking property data, but also established greater transparency and accountability. These standards helped demystify condition ratings and other property data points, making it easier for the city and Land Bank to ensure consistency and perform quality control reviews of property data.³⁹

From the outset, the process was designed to demonstrate that collected data translates into action.⁴⁰ This turned out to be pivotal for sustaining engagement with residents. Residents' use of the Portal helped create a positive feedback loop: residents could access key information about properties so they could take action themselves and report information about conditions, the city and the Land Bank sought funding using residents' input, funders could see how the Land Bank and city's plans and actions were informed by residents' input, and the city and Land Bank were better able to address issues the residents highlighted.⁴¹

Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil

Sharing Power and Advancing Equity



Why?

In 1989, following the collapse of a twenty-year military dictatorship, leaders from the socialist Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, pioneered participatory budgeting (PB) as a way to empower residents, reduce disparities in service and access to policy-making, and enhance the legitimacy of democratic governance against the backdrop of decades of corrupt governance. Working closely with civil society organizations, the PT expanded PB across Brazil. The practice has since been adopted and adapted by cities around the world.

Porto Alegre faced extreme disparities in income and quality of life. Participatory budgeting put all residents who wanted to participate, regardless of socio-economic status, at the center of important governing decisions and engaged them in complex policy decisions with direct effects on their lives and living conditions.



What?

Participatory budgeting empowered residents to make binding, rather than merely advisory, recommendations on public spending. Specifically, the program gave residents control over the infrastructure portion of the city's budget. City government, in deep collaboration with civil society organizations, asked residents to participate in a process of co-developing ideas for local improvements, prioritizing and voting on these ideas, and creating oversight for implementation.

Residents were invited to identify the subjects of discussion or concern—from sanitation to education—and then work with elected officials to craft budget proposals. Residents then voted on these proposals to determine where and how to spend public money.⁴² Beyond Brazil, PB processes have been used to address a range of difficult issues including land use, racial and social inequity, and public safety.



Who?

At the height of PB in Porto Alegre, the World Bank found that more than fifty thousand people a year participated in assemblies across the city.⁴³ Community-based partners facilitated many aspects of the process. Traditionally marginalized groups were able to engage and have direct influence over budget allocation. Residents who had long been overlooked by city government—including women and those with little income or education—embraced participatory budgeting as an opportunity to redirect funds for critical services to their neighborhoods.



How?

The first phase of Porto Alegre's PB process involved a series of neighborhood assemblies in sixteen regions of the city. There were assemblies of two types: public works and thematic. In the public works forum, citizens came together, discussed, debated, deliberated, voted on local budget priorities, and elected delegates to move on to the next phase of the process. In the thematic assemblies, citizens discussed policy areas that extended beyond the municipality—for example, transportation, health, and education.

The next phase of the process brought elected delegates together for regional budget forums, during which they consolidated the priorities from the neighborhood assemblies and mapped out priorities for their regions.⁴⁴ There was a parallel process for thematic budget forums. Delegates from these forums elected councilors to represent the residents' priorities as members of the Municipal Budget Council (COP). Residents were invited to attend these forums as observers.

In the third phase, the Municipal Budget Council (COP) made decisions about the distribution of funds throughout the city.⁴⁵ Meetings of the COP were open to all residents to observe the process. The COP

also deliberated and debated to determine the distributive rules that would govern the following year's PB process. The COP voted on resident-nominated public works projects and submitted the budget to the mayor's office and the city legislature. The COP also monitored the implementation of projects, making it a mechanism for maintaining both transparency and direct accountability to residents.

Outcomes

PB quickly became popular in Brazil, with 4.3 percent of large Brazilian cities launching their own PB programs within the first three years following the launch of Porto Alegre's program, and that share roughly doubling every three years through 2004.⁴⁶ In many of these cities, PB led to decreased corruption; improvement on health indicators such as infant mortality; and increased public spending on healthcare, education, and sanitation.⁴⁷ One study in Brazil found that municipalities that implemented PB were able to collect nearly 40 percent more local taxes on average than similar municipalities without PB.⁴⁸ At the height of Porto Alegre's PB utilization, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, residents could vote on spending priorities for the entire share of the city's investment resources, making the city exceptional in terms of funds per capita allocated through PB.⁴⁹

PB also had a redistributive effect, with lower-income neighborhoods receiving more spending per capita than wealthier areas, although census data tracking over ten years of PB in Brazil showed that redistribution of public funds only became visible several years after the implementation of PB.⁵⁰ The power of PB dissipated in Porto Alegre after 2005 following a change in leadership. With the PT suffering electoral defeat across the country following the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, city leaders suspended the practice in Porto Alegre in 2017.

Design Insights

After decades of public disenfranchisement, the new leaders in Porto Alegre's government made sharing power in public decision-making a top priority, creating a sense of autonomy and agency that many residents had never experienced before. To bypass a historically corrupt and dysfunctional representative democracy at the local level, the creators of PB designed a new municipal representative structure. The purpose of the assemblies and the election of budget delegates was to devolve decision-making power to residents and enable them to co-create public policy. The structure of the process, with three concrete phases, created opportunities for residents to co-decide on key policy issues that affected their lives, and its design created multi-layered mechanisms for engagement, legitimacy, and self-determination. The layered design also established entry points for engagement for different segments of the population. For example, participants in the local and regional public works assemblies had relatively high participation from lower-income residents, while thematic assemblies attracted more middle-class professionals and technocrats.⁵¹

Although sharing power with residents and establishing more equitable processes of public decision-making were key motivations for the leaders in Porto Alegre, PB also tapped into resident's knowledge and strengthened relationships, lending legitimacy and support to city leaders. Establishing multiple phases of deliberation, prioritization, and voting both served the purposes and fit the particular context of a corrupt political culture and low trust in government.

The design of the process, with its emphasis on transparency and accountability, also enabled ongoing engagement of residents in decision-making and created a structure for social movements and civil society leaders to exert political pressure for implementation. In other contexts, participatory budgeting has been used with different primary objectives, and designs have reflected those differences. PB is a practice, not a cookie-cutter solution.

Participatory Budgeting Around the World

Participatory budgeting (PB) in Porto Alegre helped establish a growing number of civil society organizations across the globe, including the [Participatory Budgeting Project](#).⁵² By 2013, the practices pioneered in Porto Alegre had spread to more than 2,700 municipalities worldwide. In the US and Canada, more than \$386 million public dollars were allocated through PB between 2009 and 2022, and close to 740,000 residents had participated in PB processes.⁵³ Portugal launched the world's first nationwide PB process in 2018. Starting in 2014, Paris began earmarking nearly 25 percent of the city's budget for PB, the largest sum of public money ever allocated for participatory budgeting.

In cities that have adopted PB, the practice can serve as a catalyst for incorporating digital tools in governance to support increased resident participation as well as enabling young people to participate in the allocation of public funds.⁵⁴ New York City, Boston, and Seattle have launched youth-driven PB programs. Residents' proposals and participation in public decision-making have led to improvements in services, more cooperation between administrative departments, and increased operational efficiency and government responsiveness.⁵⁵ In Menlo Park, California, a PB process helped clarify and protect residents' priorities during a budget crisis. (See "[Leading Civic Engagement: Three Cases](#).")

PB in the US has typically not included a process for electing budget representatives. The focus has been more on deliberation among volunteers who design and submit proposals which, in turn, are put back to the larger community for a vote. The primary goal of PB in the US has often been strengthening relationships between residents and their local elected officials by putting decisions about discretionary spending directly in residents' hands.

Whatever the aims of engagement, it is critical to pay close attention to the question of "who" participates and ensure processes are designed to advance equity rather than re-affirm the status quo. PB has often been designed and implemented in close collaboration with local grassroots organizations and/or expert technical assistance providers like the Participatory Budgeting Project. In 2020, New York City became the first municipality in the country to host a youth-driven participatory budgeting process on [Decidim](#), an open-source civic tech platform used in cities worldwide to promote direct democracy. In this process, young people ages nine to twenty-four, regardless of citizenship status, could participate and decide how to allocate \$100,000.⁵⁶ This pilot was designed to create opportunities for historically marginalized constituencies to participate, including young people, noncitizens, and communities of color.

Like all engagement efforts, PB works best when the democratic goals of those leading it are thoughtfully aligned with the content of the budgeting choices, the participating individuals and organizations, and the practical design decisions that guide the process.

Infrastructure for Civic Engagement in Bologna, Italy

Building Relationships and Mobilizing Resources



Why?

In the years following the economic crisis in 2008, Italy struggled to stabilize its economy. City-owned properties, parks, gardens, and squares were in need of better care, and residents were increasingly disengaged from collective life.⁵⁷ Citizens who wanted to step up and contribute to the revitalization of public spaces or to utilize public assets in service of their communities found themselves stymied by inefficient procedures and red tape. The municipal government built a multi-pronged approach to removing barriers and creating new opportunities for residents to coproduce services, rehabilitate spaces, and collaborate to improve community life, creating and expanding innovative models of civic engagement with an ongoing commitment to learning and experimentation.⁵⁸ The city established two new institutional bases to streamline this work: an Office of Active Citizenship within city hall and the Urban Innovation Foundation, created in partnership with the University of Bologna. The city's collaborative approach centered proximity and the principle of subsidiarity—centering neighborhoods as the institutions closest to citizens. The idea was to build the city's collective capacity for “civic imagination.”



What?

The city fostered new relationships with communities and citizens by inviting residents to take initiative to revitalize and imagine new uses for public and community spaces and assets. To reduce barriers, the city passed a new regulation that permitted any resident or organization to enter into a “collaboration pact” with the city. Through this and other tools and initiatives, including a participatory budgeting process and working with the community to develop a new Urban Planning, Mobility, Health, and Education plan, the Office of Active Citizenship and the Urban Innovation Foundation's “Civic Imagination Office” supported residents both in making practical improvements in their communities and in thinking and working together to maximize their enjoyment of and benefit from publicly owned spaces.



Who?

Any resident could apply for a collaboration pact, and all residents over age sixteen were eligible to vote for PB proposals, regardless of citizenship status. The Civic Imagination Office hosted public “labs” and meetings in every neighborhood, with special attention to the most fragile zones. Through social media, students and young residents received and shared messages about participation opportunities, and residents in all six districts helped spread the word about opportunities to participate.

In addition to workers from the city and university, each lab had a community manager or “proximity agent” to lead outreach and act as the primary point of contact for residents in their respective districts.



How?

When city districts were reorganized in 2015, the Office of Active Citizenship established satellite offices in each of the new districts, ensuring that anyone who wanted to improve or utilize public spaces near their home would not have to travel to city hall to get support for their project from the city. To deepen the city's ability to engage equitably and strategically, the Civic Imagination Office complemented these efforts by establishing six district “labs” to actively facilitate connections and lead community planning around an annual participatory budget process.

The Civic Imagination Office's district labs worked directly with communities, particularly those that had been historically underserved, to understand, refine, and implement residents' ideas for improving the quality of life in their neighborhoods and to help residents understand the mechanisms available

for collaboration with the city on topics of their choosing. To increase accessibility and participation, the labs provided childcare during informational meetings.

Through the district labs and/or the Office of Active Citizenship, residents with ideas that required space, authorization, and/or facilitation from the city could enter into collaboration pacts. Residents and community groups with larger-scale plans for initiatives to improve Bologna's neighborhoods and quality of life could submit proposals for the participatory budgeting process and let their neighbors vote on them. The city did not rely solely on residents encountering their local labs, but also prominently featured participation opportunities like the pacts and the PB process on the city's popular web portal, called Iperbole. It also established "Neighborhood Schools" to provide community empowerment education for residents and "Neighborhood Houses" as local sites to promote cultural welfare and activities.

The deputy mayor who helped establish the Civic Imagination Office went on to become mayor of the metropolitan city government of Bologna. In this role, he established a practice of moving his offices, staff, executive board, and counselors to one of the city's six districts for one week out of each month on a rotating basis.

Outcomes

Bologna created multiple opportunities for residents to engage in their community, both in person and through digital platforms, which enabled high levels of participation. By 2020, sixty thousand residents had explored participation opportunities online using Iperbole, and residents had entered into four hundred collaboration pacts with the city. The city had received 225 participatory budgeting proposals, and over fifty thousand people had voted on PB projects. Resident-led projects involved community members in improvements to thirty-five public buildings, fifteen thousand square meters of city, forty green areas, and twenty schools. As of October 2021, more than fifteen thousand people had participated in activities organized by the district labs in over 550 meetings designed around eighteen activities—from participatory budgeting and sustainable mobility planning to neighborhood walks. Every district in the city had dozens of active or completed projects initiated through the district labs.

When COVID-19 hit Bologna, the Civic Imagination Office, utilizing both online tools and phone calls, surveyed three hundred associations to understand conditions on the ground, connected residents and grassroots organizations to resources, provided engagement online, and offered support, such as delivery services and opportunities to maintain social relationships despite social distancing.

Coming out of the pandemic, the city returned to its proximity-based approach to governance and took additional steps to build relationships between government and residents, including reorganizing services like policing and sanitation to ensure that local units served local communities.

Design Insights

Bologna designed its civic engagement infrastructure to mobilize civic resources of all kinds. To ensure participation throughout the city, Bologna's strategy emphasized proximity—meeting people where they were physically located through the district labs. While residents may not have trusted higher levels of government and bureaucratic institutions, many were ready to engage in their own neighborhoods.

The City of Bologna invested much time and effort in designing its engagement infrastructure and worked closely with both residents and city departments to create the conditions for success. To create a sense of shared responsibility for the “urban commons,” the city made it easier for residents to take initiative in cleaning and beautifying public spaces and contributing to community life. Before launching the collaboration pacts, the head of the Office of Active Citizenship met with department heads across city government to orient them to the regulation and ensure they would be prepared to support resident proposals as needed. While the Office of Active Citizenship helped residents navigate bureaucracy and logistics, the Civic Imagination Office worked with residents in each district to help them think strategically about their needs and interests, allowing for maximum community-centered initiative and ownership. Baking flexibility into its engagement strategy was key. Instead of offering pre-made solutions or creating public relations campaigns, the city focused on including residents in decisions and making personal connections. Not all projects or conversations were strictly local or place-based. The Civic Imagination Office facilitated the creation of ad hoc teams to collaborate on projects and proposals based on their particular topic and geographical area of interest. Residents’ interest in collaboration provided openings for city staff to communicate plans, priorities, and activities, as well as learn about residents’ needs. While resident-led projects were selected on the ability of the city and residents to achieve results in relatively short time frames, the two-way communication allowed for alignment with longer-term planning processes. In general, implementing projects involving public streets or squares took longer due to bureaucratic hurdles, while projects focused on sports, culture, or education advanced more quickly.

The Civic Imagination Office allowed the city to harness capacity at the university to deepen engagement and reach residents who wanted to contribute in more collaborative and strategic ways. As with most engagement efforts, those who were already likely to engage were the most actively engaged, but the labs provided a forum for them to connect with one another and opportunities to bring their friends and neighbors into the fold. When COVID-19 hit Bologna in March 2020, the city was able to build off of its well-designed engagement infrastructure to stay in close contact with residents while adapting to new realities.

People’s Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi

Advancing Equity and Building Relationships



Why?

Since the 1990s, Jackson has been a majority Black city in a state with a centuries-long history of anti-Black violence and oppression. In the mid-2000s, organizers with the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM) launched the [Jackson People’s Assembly](#) (JPA) as a forum for building the political and economic power of Black and other oppressed and underrepresented people. Its ambition was to build a “mass base with the political clarity, organizational capacity, and material self-sufficiency to advance” self-determination and establish “a broad-based solidarity economy.”⁵⁹

By the time of the 2020 census, more than 80 percent of Jackson residents were of African descent, but Black-owned businesses still represented only a tiny fraction of private industry wealth in Jackson, and the annual income of over a third of Black residents fell below the federal poverty line. Deteriorating infrastructure, spotty service delivery, and violent crime were driving residents out of the city. While the JPA had demonstrated its political power in getting its own nominees to the top of city

hall (Mayor Chokwe Lumumba and, later, his son, Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba), city leaders, working within the procedural and budgetary constraints of city government, had to collaborate with the JPA on their shared goals without co-opting it.



What?

The JPA gathered community members to discuss and deliberate on the issues that mattered to them, allowing participants to set the agenda. Through consensus building and skillful facilitation, assembly members identified priorities and took action based on their shared goals, forming coalitions and initiatives to tackle problems. The Assembly established subcommittees to advocate and organize residents on a range of policy issues, including economic development, education, youth services, matters affecting LGBTQ and gender nonconforming people, elders/senior supports, housing, public safety, and health and well-being.

Assembly organizers worked with city hall to help participants connect their priorities to items on the city council's agenda and to larger, longer-term visions for the city and the community. As much as possible, the JPA sought to work with rather than in opposition to city government, but at times Assembly leaders organized civic action to protest policy decisions that did not align with its goals, vision, and priorities.



Who?

Supported by a core set of organizational partners including the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the People's Advocacy Institute, Working Together Jackson, One Voice MS, and others, the JPA welcomed all residents, regardless of citizenship, age, former incarceration, or racial/ethnic background. Hundreds attended regularly, and a smaller subset of active Assembly members engaged in committee work.

City officials attended and sometimes initiated assemblies to stay aligned with residents' concerns, policy preferences, and proposals, promising not to take a "design and defend" approach to governing. Assembly organizers invited city staff whose work related to topics on the agenda to come to the assembly to provide information and answer questions. All city government officials and workers were welcome to attend as citizens.



How?

The JPA provided a forum for civic exchange and policy conversation outside of the formal, rigid processes and power structures of city hall. For city government, participating in the assemblies was a way to share information and learn about the needs of residents, gaps in city services, and the impact of existing policies. Anyone, from the mayor to a community member, could propose an assembly. The JPA typically met several times a year at various locations, sometimes focused on a specific policy area with broad community interest (e.g., interrupting cycles of violence) and sometimes not. City officials attended as participants, bound by the same set of norms and agreements as other attendees. Facilitators often broke attendees into small groups for discussion and brainstorming with the goal of sharing information and creating community-based programs and initiatives to respond to needs as well as vetting policy proposals and offering guidance on city officials' policy decisions.

To encourage participation, assemblies took place in accessible community locations and offered childcare, transportation, and food. Organizers prioritized strong facilitation and timeliness, ensuring respectful and focused conversations through the JPA's "Community Agreements," a values-based document that organizers reviewed and asked all participants to follow at every meeting. JPA representatives presented the Assembly's consensus-based decisions during city council meetings. When the city's actions on priority issues were out of step with the Assembly's recommendations, organizers strategized with regular attendees to determine how to respond.

Outcomes

Engagement between the city and the JPA gave Jackson residents a new degree of agency: they could see their concerns and priorities reflected in the city's budget and policies. After he was elected as a city council member in 2009, Chokwe Lumumba used assemblies in his ward as the basis for his decision-making, embracing accountability to his constituents and ensuring that his policy choices were transparent. Lumumba's election as mayor of Jackson in 2013 helped demonstrate that a grassroots process could generate real political power without relying on traditional political party support. During his time in office, Lumumba worked with the JPA, holding meetings in each of the city's wards, to pass a one-percent sales tax to fund much-needed infrastructure improvements.

Translating Black political power into Black economic power and equal treatment under the law remained a challenge. Factions in city government sometimes thwarted progress on priorities set by the JPA. A supermajority of state legislators partial to maintaining the status quo were proactive about restricting municipal autonomy when Jackson's vision for itself did not align with their preferences. (For example, the state legislature passed a law prohibiting any municipality from establishing its own minimum wage when Jackson workers organized around a proposed minimum wage of fifteen dollars per hour in the city.)

After Chokwe Antar Lumumba was elected with the Assembly's support in 2017, the JPA hosted learning opportunities with the city's chief administrative officer to explain budget allocation processes to participants as part of a new participatory budgeting initiative. Relationships and partnerships established through the JPA provided critical support during a series of crises, including COVID-19 and an arctic blast that wreaked havoc on an already unreliable water system, mobilizing aid to community members in need of support. An organizer from JPA noted that those who received help often wanted to offer help in return, and observed that the mutual aid coordinated through JPA partners had resulted in vulnerable community members becoming more engaged and invested in the Assembly's work.

While major challenges rooted in structural racism remained, the JPA provided a strong base for building both political power and collective supports for disenfranchised and historically marginalized Jackson residents, and city leaders were able to utilize assemblies for ongoing dialogue about priorities and needs, practical support for advancing community goals through the JPA's autonomous initiatives, and advocacy on policy issues.

Design Insights

The JPA was intentional in its choices about when and where assemblies were held. To show that they valued participants' time, organizers prized efficient and transparent time-keeping. Leadership in city hall coordinated with the JPA for timely community input on policy questions. The Assembly's [Community Agreements](#) (see breakout box), honed over time, offered clear guiding principles and values for all participants, supported effective facilitation, and promoted an inclusive and respectful process.


Another key design consideration for ensuring inclusiveness and showing respect for residents was meeting them where they were—choosing locations thoughtfully and strategically in each ward and offering supports like childcare, food, and transportation to reduce barriers to participation. The city's chief administrative officer devised a game to teach participants how the municipal budget works, making a dry and complex subject fun and interactive. City leaders also worked with the JPA to organize informal, family-friendly community-building events like the Jackson Love Fest.

Assembly leaders continually honed their facilitation skills and grappled with the challenge of striking an appropriate balance between partnering with city government to advance equity, and mobilizing to put extra pressure on the government. Debating these issues in the context of the People's Assembly helped residents understand how to connect day-to-day governance concerns (e.g., improving roads or planting trees) to larger conversations and visions (e.g., infrastructure and environmental justice). Conversely, to workers and officials in attendance, it was sometimes eye-opening to hear how their work and choices affected city residents. As organizers and long-time activists moved into executive and legislative positions in city government, they continued to learn about when to press for progress and stand on principle and when to make strategic compromises.

When climate disasters, failing infrastructure, and COVID-19 tested the city, the JPA's efforts to support the community broadened the base of residents engaged with the Assembly and heightened residents' awareness of systemic failures and inequity, as well as their own individual and collective agency to push for more equity and accountability. For city leaders, working with engaged residents determined to work together to lift one another up through the JPA was both good governance and good politics.

Setting Norms: The Jackson People's Assembly's Community Agreements

- Respect the rights of others to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own. When you disagree, challenge/critique the idea, not the person.
- Practice intentional listening. Let your comments, requests for clarification, critiques, etc., reflect that you have paid attention to the comments made by the person who spoke before you.
- Step up and step back. Share responsibility. If you have much to say, try to hold back a bit; if you are hesitant to speak, look for opportunities to contribute to the discussion.
- Recognize that we are still learning. Be willing to change your perspective and make space for others to do the same.
- Create a safe space for sharing. Keep personal stories that people share, personal.
- Always be guided by and offer contributions that are rooted in and come from our desire to improve our beloved community of Jackson. Collective gain is our goal.



Part III: Designing Your Civic Engagement

Part III: Designing Your Civic Engagement

Once you have understood your city’s past engagement efforts, identified areas for growth, and gotten familiar with how to apply the four key design questions to specific engagement practices, you should be ready to use the questions to design your city’s engagement efforts with renewed focus and intentionality. You may use the accompanying workbook to support these efforts. Figure 4 appears again for your reference.

Figure 4
Four Essential Design Questions




As you work through these essential questions, check your answers continually for alignment with your intentions—the democratic goals, principles, and outcomes you are pursuing. There are many possible answers to these questions, and there is no perfect formula. The best course of action is simply to be as intentional as possible about the design of the engagement, learn fast by engaging stakeholders in continuous reflection, and iterate. The more thoughtfully designed and well-adapted the effort, the less likely it is to fail or backfire.

Determine Your Why

Formulate concrete, compelling purposes for the engagement effort

Set transparent goals that help residents understand why you want to engage them. The five possible goals of engagement outlined in the framework are not mutually exclusive; they often overlap. Each goal can build toward and reinforce the others. At the same time, it is helpful to be very clear about the primary goal so

people know what motivates you to engage them. Once the primary “why” is clear, incorporating additional goals can help guide and deepen engagement efforts. For example, prioritizing equity throughout the process, regardless of the primary goal, can enhance legitimacy, build trust, and ensure more equitable policy outcomes. For more on the goals of engagement, please refer back to figure 1 and the introduction of the Democratic Goals of Civic Engagement on page 6.

 WHY?	
Goal	<p>Formulate concrete, compelling purposes for the engagement effort</p> <p><i>Set transparent goals that help residents understand why you want to engage them.</i></p>
Questions to Ask	<p>Why are you asking residents to participate? Is your primary goal to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Advance equity 2. Build relationships 3. Generate knowledge 4. Mobilize resources 5. Share power 6. Some combination of these five? <p>How will you know if you are achieving your goal(s)?</p> <p>How will you communicate your goal(s) to residents?</p>


Determine Your What

Be clear about the subject of the engagement effort and frame it carefully

Define the topic concretely and make it clear what you are asking residents to think, talk, or do something about. Be precise about what is—and is not—in the scope of the effort. This means “scoping” the subject appropriately and finding the right balance between broad, abstract subjects (e.g., priorities for “the future of the city”) and narrow, concrete topics (e.g., “signage at the intersection of Elm street and Church street”). If a subject is framed too narrowly, residents may feel frustrated that city government is failing to understand or provide an opportunity to discuss the broader context of the issue. If a subject is framed too broadly, conversations may lack focus and become unwieldy. Here are a few considerations to keep in mind when determining the scope and framing the subject of an engagement effort:

- How do different parties see the issue? For example, city hall may see a development project as an opportunity while some residents see it as a problem, or vice versa.
- What is the history of the issue and how does the way it has (not) been addressed in the past inform the way it could be discussed in the present?
- What boundaries apply regarding time, budget, authority, and capacity?
- Are you providing enough relevant, unbiased background detail for participants to offer an informed opinion? (If it is impossible to provide sufficient information in a digestible format, you probably need to reframe the subject of the engagement.)
- If you are asking residents to take some action, make sure you are extremely clear about the steps involved and the support the city will provide. If the city cannot articulate the steps or scaffold the action, it is unlikely residents will do what you are asking them to do.

Finally, if residents do not understand why they should care about the topic on which you are asking them to engage, the effort is unlikely to succeed—especially if they are looking for something entirely different from city government. Make sure that the subject of engagement speaks directly to residents’ priorities and addresses their struggles. If residents do not feel respected for putting in the time and effort you are asking them, they are unlikely to engage again.

 WHAT?	
Goal	<p>Be clear about the subject of the engagement effort and frame it carefully</p> <p><i>Explain what you are asking residents to think, talk, or do something about and be clear what is and what is not within the scope of the effort.</i></p>
Questions to Ask	<p>How important is this subject of engagement (e.g., a dangerous intersection, the future of the riverfront, etc.) to residents and why?</p> <p>How important is the subject to city officials and why?</p> <p>How has the engagement subject been discussed and resolved (or not) in the past?</p> <p>Do you hope to change the terms of the debate? If so, how will you frame the subject to accomplish that?</p> <p>What role have residents had in defining, redefining, and/or refining the subject?</p> <p>What background information might participants need in order to understand the topic?</p> <p>What are you asking residents to do (e.g., give time, input, resources, expertise, etc.)?</p> <p>What are your expectations?</p> <p>What can residents expect to receive from you in return?</p>


Determine Your Who

Identify the right groups of residents and pay attention to marginalized voices

Ensure equitable community representation and meaningful city hall representation. Getting clear about who you will engage is essential. Including new voices will help you tap into the deep well of insight, experience, and knowledge that resides in your city. It will also broaden legitimacy and support for policies and decisions. “Who” is not just a question of engagement across demographics and neighborhoods but also an opportunity to think through cross-departmental initiatives and cross-sector partnerships with your city’s nonprofits, community and faith-based organizations, small businesses, schools, and universities.

Once you have a set of participants in mind, it is equally important to ask who is *not* on that list. Look at your “what” and your “why” and ask yourself and your partners if everyone with a stake in the “what” and the “why” of your participation is represented. Excluding stakeholders often leads to unintended consequences and can cause an engagement effort to backfire.

Partnerships can be vital for keeping engagement efforts alive. All of the examples offered in Part II involved key partnerships: with private industry in San Francisco, the university in Bologna, a county government office in Flint, a grassroots organization in Jackson, and civil society organizations in Porto Alegre. In most cases, these entities were already working to address the same problems that the city wanted to solve and could help city government address them more efficiently and effectively. Partners can help with outreach, build pipelines for talent, augment operational capacity, provide technical assistance, gather on-the-ground information, or otherwise offer resources and bridge gaps in services and expertise.⁶⁰ Sustainable partnerships require strong collaboration, trust, explicit commitments and role differentiation, and clarity about the outcomes sought by all partners.


 WHO?	
Goal	<p>Identify the right groups of residents and pay attention to marginalized voices</p> <p><i>Ensure equitable community representation and meaningful city hall representation.</i></p>
Questions to Ask	<p>Are you hoping to engage a broad cross-section of the community or a focused subset of residents relevant to the engagement subject?</p> <p>Who has been engaged on this subject in the past? Should they continue to be? Why?</p> <p>Who has not been engaged but should? Why?</p> <p>Who should be consulted early in the process of deciding who should be engaged?</p> <p>How much latitude will these actors have to determine who participates and how?</p> <p>What are the demographics of the target group, including average age and digital literacy?</p> <p>Have you asked potential participants how to make the engagement more accessible and/or inclusive?</p> <p>Are there specific community leaders, business associations, voluntary civic organizations, or activists being engaged?</p> <p>Are there particular dynamics between those invited to participate (both in general and in relationship to the specific topic of engagement) you should anticipate?</p> <p>Is there trust or relationship building that needs to occur before moving forward with some participants?</p> <p>Who will represent city hall?</p> <p>Who will facilitate?</p> <p>How will the style, position, and decision-making power of the people running the engagement and/or representing city hall affect the engagement?</p>

Determine Your How

Select a mix of tools and methods that engage residents

Optimize for functionality, accessibility, and inclusiveness. Choose methods, platforms, and channels that are conducive to the type of work you want to do with residents. Think about group size (one big plenary session versus smaller break-out groups), type of venue (city hall, a community center, a church, online, etc.), and format and interaction design (Q&A, brainstorm, voting on priorities, online consultation, clean-your-park event, hackathon, an ideas competition, a budgeting exercise, etc.). Given your why, what, and who, what form of engagement will most likely produce the desired result? There are hundreds of different methods, formats, tools, and techniques to choose among, and your selections must depend on the alignment with the other variables. You can find a wide range of crowdsourced [examples of engagement tools and methods](#) at Participedia. The Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins University and the Cities of Service Coalition also detail [some useful techniques and approaches](#) as well as [examples and resources](#) on topics ranging from crowdfunding to citizen science to spark your imagination.

Whatever method, platform, channel, and format you choose, make sure you test functionality, attend to accessibility, and optimize for inclusiveness. This work may require more creativity, flexibility, and innovation than expected. The logistics of implementing your civic engagement plan have a huge effect on the quality and effectiveness of the engagement. Location, timing, outreach, and accessibility have major implications for whether participants from various communities or backgrounds can or are willing to participate. Understanding and addressing barriers to participation must be central to planning processes. Make time for brainstorming and experimentation to learn what works. Some efforts will fail; ensure that hard lessons learned do not go to waste.

 HOW?	
Goal	<p>Select a mix of tools and methods that engage residents</p> <p><i>Optimize for functionality, accessibility, and inclusiveness.</i></p>
Questions to Ask	<p>Will you engage participants individually (e.g., surveys, interviews), in small groups (e.g., focus groups, working groups), or as a whole group (e.g., town hall meeting, online event, metaverse meetup, etc.)?</p> <p>What type(s) of interaction (e.g., listening, collaborative inquiry, brainstorming, debating, voting on priorities and preferences, digital forum or discussion, game, etc.) will help you accomplish your engagement goals?</p> <p>What <i>mix</i> of engagement opportunities (e.g., an open town hall forum and a Zoom event; a deliberative poll and a neighborhood listening session; a crowdfunding campaign, a digital anti-litter campaign, and an in-person clean-up-your-block rally, etc.) maximizes inclusiveness and equity as well as effectiveness and efficiency?</p> <p>What kind of outreach will you do?</p> <p>How will you monitor enrollment, participation, and ongoing engagement?</p> <p>How formal or informal will the terms of the engagement be?</p> <p>How formal or informal will the setting for the engagement be?</p> <p>How long will the engagement last?</p> <p>What are the key steps at each stage?</p> <p>Who holds authority over decision-making processes?</p> <p>How much power or authority over public policy and decision-making is vested in the engagement process?</p> <p>How will the results inform city hall actions, decisions, or policies?</p> <p>What should participants expect or not expect as a result of their engagement?</p> <p>How will the city communicate decisions and outcomes back to participants and the public?</p>

Using social media

Approximately half of Americans have engaged in some form of political or civic-minded activity on social media in the past year and believe it is an important way to get elected officials to pay attention or to sustain social movements. Utilizing social media platforms must be part of your engagement and communication strategy. Moreover, social media can help you share information and gather data through surveys and polls. Social media channels can provide a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, and they are free, quick, and easy to use, making them a fertile environment for creativity and experimentation on the part of city government.

Platforms have different functionalities and different audiences, and audiences vary by location. Knowing who you will reach within each platform is essential to ensuring you are reaching a diverse and representative audience. (The Pew Research Center offers up-to-date [research and data on social media use and perceptions](#).) For more, see the “[Technology](#)” section in Part IV of this guide.

Keep in mind, also, the limitations of social media platforms, including inequitably distributed internet access and digital literacy, the prevalence of online harassment and threats (“trolling”), and concerns about privacy and appropriate uses of data.

Alignment

Effective civic engagement efforts begin by carefully considering how city hall can design an engagement that does justice to residents and their concerns, ideas, and aspirations. A design that aligns the why, what, who, and how of engagement is more likely to meet residents where they are—literally and figuratively—and less likely to result in disappointment on either side.

Answering the four key questions in the design phase will result in a first version of the effort, but there will be opportunities to iterate, tweak the approach, and recalibrate for alignment throughout the process. Continually checking for alignment allows you to steer around the usual pitfalls of civic engagement: misaligned expectations about the goals, misunderstandings about residents' role, exclusion of critical stakeholders, and choosing tools and methods that do not support meaningful engagement.

Additional resources to help you design effective engagement efforts and strategies include the [Strengthening and Sustaining Public Engagement planning guide](#) and the [Keeping People Connected toolkit](#) from Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research and public engagement organization dedicated to strengthening democracy. Cities of Service also offers a [checklist](#) to support well-aligned engagement designs.

“Long-underserved populations want to be recognized, not as problems to be fixed or statistics to be studied, but as real people who have aspirations for themselves and their families.”

DAVID LANHAM & AMY LUI, BROOKINGS INSTITUTE⁶¹

The background of the page is a detailed, light-colored architectural floor plan of a building complex. The plan shows various rooms, corridors, and structural elements, all rendered in a light beige or cream color against a dark red background. The lines are thin and precise, creating a complex geometric pattern.

Part IV: Implementation and Evaluation

Part IV: Implementation and Evaluation

Designing an engagement plan is one thing; implementing the design is a challenge in its own right. There are various common challenges worth anticipating, including building trust, dealing with misinformation, using technology, managing logistics, and coordinating within city hall.

This section offers tools and guidance to help you plan, adjust, and adapt as you implement a civic engagement strategy. Civic engagement is not linear. Expect to circle back, rethink, and revise plans as you go. Build in time and capacity to solicit and learn from participant feedback in an ongoing way through formal and informal methods.

The workbook provides further questions and prompts to help you think through your individual challenges.

Trust Building

City leaders should anticipate that their calls for engagement may be misunderstood or viewed with suspicion. It is not uncommon for city-initiated engagement efforts to be met with skepticism, distrust, and even hostility. People may question city leaders' intentions, doubt their competence, or simply feel their participation will not actually lead to anything. A lack of trust may be the result of disappointment with civic engagement efforts in the past. For historically marginalized communities, it can be hard to believe that city government—an institution that in many places has created, reinforced, and upheld systemic exclusion and oppression—is now interested in their concerns and ideas and wants to include them in building a better, more equitable future.

While civic engagement can help rebuild trust between residents and government, existing mistrust will continue to affect the process, which is why it is important to ensure that engagement is appropriately representative, inclusive, and sensitive to the particulars of your city's history and demographics.

Suggestions to start building trust

- Promote conversations internally with staff to discuss the city's history and how city services, programs, or staff may still be perceived (accurately or inaccurately) as hostile or harmful to historically marginalized groups.
- Seek to build relationships and establish bridges with leaders in faith-based organizations, community centers, the arts and culture scene, minority-owned businesses, nonprofit and community-service organizations, community foundations, advocacy groups, and youth work. Check in at regular intervals to understand needs. Follow up.
- Go directly into the neighborhoods where people are struggling. Demonstrate a commitment to serving by participating in neighborhood cleanups or helping out at food pantries (without inviting press). Small acts of kindness and care for communities build trust far more reliably than words. Invest in new infrastructure for engagement and outreach. Consult with advocates for excluded communities to explore how space and language can be made more accessible and convey a sense of belonging.
- Be *actively* transparent. Don't depend on residents to ask what data you have or how you are using it. Volunteer that information. Share your data with partners and residents—even if it makes you look bad. If you feel you are not doing enough, say so. Ask what is needed, and if you need help, ask for it.
- Whenever possible, compensate those helping the city with outreach and accessibility for their time and assistance.
- Consider the full range of ways in which residents contribute to civic life and find ways to acknowledge and show appreciation for a broader set of abilities and efforts than those that usually get recognized and rewarded.

For more on these topics, see [*The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement: A Guide to Transformative Change*](#) by Kip Holley and the [*Public Participation Resource Guide*](#) from the City of Madison's Racial Equity and Social Justice Initiative.

Six Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement in Cities (adapted from Kip Holley)

1 Embracing the Gifts of Diversity

Communities include many different people with diverse gifts who take on leadership roles at various times. Engagement environments that connect these people and their talents effectively build bridging social capital and community resourcefulness by connecting local concerns to city-wide issues.

2 Realizing the Role of Race, Power, and Injustice

Acknowledging power imbalances and harm caused by systemic racism, class bias, and abuses of power validates the experiences of those who have felt shut out of decisions and creates space to challenge and change power dynamics (but be prepared for strong resistance from those who benefit from the status quo).

3 Radical Hospitality

Many of the residents whom city leaders need to learn from and include face high barriers to engagement. City leaders must “decide that these voices are integral to the conversation” and invite “difficult conversations.” Offering radical hospitality means meeting people where they are, listening deeply, speaking to shared values, and fostering a sense of belonging that puts people from all walks of life on equal footing. (For more on difficult conversations, see "[Difficult Conversations: Practical Tools for Navigating Charged Conversations](#)" with Rob Wilkinson.)

4 Trust Building and Commitment

To build trust, establish pathways for shared leadership and shared accountability through complete and honest communication and mutual learning. Create opportunities for people to demonstrate their skills and abilities, and resist efforts to cast blame or establish punitive approaches to accountability. Make sure that community members can see how programs and initiatives they have helped to build are creating positive change.

5 Honoring Dissent and Embracing Protest

Avoiding controversial issues is more likely to amplify dissent than prevent it. Challenges and opposition from community members can be a strong starting point for productive engagement, clarifying the values at stake and articulating alternatives that may not have been understood previously. City leaders' willingness to engage in long-term dialogue on difficult issues can create an effective container for legitimate protest.

6 Adaptability to Community Change

Change is inevitable and continuous. City government's approach to engagement must have the flexibility to change with circumstances in the city and its communities. Making the values and principles above, rather than any set of tools or tactics, the foundation for your city's engagement environment will help community members adapt to change, accept what is true, and engage in conversation about the appropriate uses of civic power.

Technology

Digital and technological tools are essential components of many civic engagement efforts, but there are digital divides both in who has access to online applications and how those with access to online applications use them. Roughly one in five adults living in US cities do not have home broadband services or a personal computer.⁶² About 85 percent of adults, however, have a smartphone from which to access the internet and download apps. Adults over sixty-five, those with no post-secondary education, and people experiencing poverty are least likely to have a smartphone and most likely to struggle with digital literacy. More data on digital access and internet usage for different purposes across different demographics is available from [Pew Research](#).ⁱⁱⁱ Given the access gaps, it is essential to identify alternative means to include those less likely to engage online, utilizing tools like chatbots, creating hybrid opportunities that combine in person and online options, and ensuring language accessibility.

Approximately half of Americans reported having engaged in some form of political or social-minded activity on social media in the past year and believe it is an important way to get elected officials' attention or sustain social movements.⁶³ Online movements to demand social change (e.g., #metoo, #blacklivesmatter) have helped amplify the voices of historically marginalized groups and raised awareness about injustice.⁶⁴ About two thirds of Americans think social media helps give a voice to underrepresented groups (though some note that it can distract from the real work of making social change).⁶⁵

For many residents, digital tools are not only a convenience but also an expectation. At their full potential, well-designed and widely used digital tools can be a powerful means of coproduction, allowing city government to function less as a service provider and more as a platform for residents to help themselves and others.⁶⁶

To account for the digital divide, the best and most effective tools have several uses to allow for various levels of comfort, access, literacy, and experience with digital tools. For example, when COVID-19 hit, the City of Boston's New Urban Mechanics partnered with the City of Boston Food Access to develop an SMS-based chat bot to provide information about benefits, delivery services, and food banks. The chat bot, available 24/7, did not require internet connectivity and chatted in eight different languages.

Cities can also engage residents in testing civic technology. For example, the Smart Chicago Collaborative established a [Civic User Testing group \(CUTgroup\)](#) to engage residents in both learning and testing emerging technology. Participants receive gift cards in exchange for providing feedback on product design to public, private, and social sector partners.

Below are some points to keep in mind while thinking through the uses of digital tools in civic engagement.

Ensure a user-centered design and approach

As with all civic engagement tools, digital tools should be responsive to residents' needs. If the tool is not supporting an articulated need for the community, it is unlikely to get much traction. Consultation and user research in the design phase should help drive adoption.⁶⁷ Gathering data on how residents use the tools (and which residents do and do not use them) can help cities understand residents' needs and behaviors—and use that information to create and refine portfolios of digital engagement tools.⁶⁸

Prioritize simplicity and interactivity while addressing privacy

Tools should be simple to use. A needlessly complicated process will frustrate even the most tech-savvy user. Present information concisely, and, whenever possible, leverage existing platforms or media that residents are already using to access information.⁶⁹ Residents may be concerned about their data privacy, so be transparent about privacy policies and intended uses of data. If you are asking residents to share information or take action, establish tools or practices for responding to residents' input and activities, and create feedback loops as you would with any other engagement practice.⁷⁰

ⁱⁱⁱ A 2020 study by researchers from Arizona State and the University of Iowa explored digital participation at the county level and its impact on economic opportunity.





Monitor accessibility and trust to ensure equity

Digital tools can collect data detailing what groups are engaging with the tool, how often, on what kind of devices, and to what effect. Residents can share this information through in-app features and user feedback surveys. Particular attention should be paid to those groups who use the tools least, who are often the same residents or communities who have been historically excluded from civic participation. Using digital tools to monitor and publish progress towards equity goals can help engagement efforts stay on track and hold agencies accountable for both improving access to tools and broadening participation.⁷¹ Note that creating a platform that is not mobile-friendly excludes residents who rely on phones for internet connectivity, and creating a phone-only app excludes those who rely on personal computers or find mobile interfaces less accessible.⁷²

Design for diversity, inclusion, and respect

Like all tools and practices designed to engage residents in decision-making and governance, effective digital tools should be accessible and inclusive of all residents and strive to meet them where they are and as they are. Ensure that tools are accessible for people with disabilities and can be used in multiple languages. The best and most effective digital engagement tools are multi-modal, allowing for information sharing across digital platforms and supplemented with low-technology forms of engagement.⁷³

Given the multitude and ever-growing number of tech and digital tools, remember to ask yourself some key questions as you are making decisions on implementation.

Questions to Consider	
 WHY	Have you articulated your purpose in using this tool with the public? Are you using it to share information, gather data, or both? How is it serving the primary engagement goal?
 WHAT	Is it clear what the information is about or how the data will be used in decision-making? Have you shared back the information you received and the actions taken or decisions made as a result?
 WHO	Who is your target audience? Did you reach an audience representative of your target group? Who engaged and who did not? Are there partners, educational institutions, or community organizations that could help you reach your target community?
 HOW	How are you using these specific tools to reach specific audiences? How are you activating additional tools to garner feedback from those who do not use these technologies?

Misinformation

As city leaders know well, the rapid spread of both misinformation and disinformation can stymie efforts to communicate effectively with residents. In this section, we focus on misinformation—content shared by people who do not realize it is false or misleading.⁷⁴

Misinformation is a complex concern with multiple causes.⁷⁵ While it is by no means a new problem, misinformation now travels with astonishing speed and efficacy thanks to social media and the algorithms and human biases that drive it.⁷⁶ Misinformation can create negative feedback loops, becoming both a result and a driver of declining trust in political institutions, public leaders, experts, and traditional media.⁷⁷

Local leaders still enjoy a higher degree of trust than their national counterparts on average, however, and this means that you have opportunities to interrupt these loops. Below are recommendations and considerations for leaders as they work to counter misinformation and the spread of disinformation in their communities.

Direct residents to the experts and amplify fact-based information using multiple channels⁷⁸

Warn residents that they may hear or have heard misinformation and highlight the work of experts (especially local experts). Monitor the situation continuously and repeat the messages as often as it takes to continue to debunk false claims.⁷⁹

Partner with civic associations and encourage residents to get involved

Resident participation in civic associations is associated with increased political trust.⁸⁰ Partnering with volunteer-run organizations and helping them reach both volunteers and clients will help you meet residents where they are, share information, and clarify questions through trusted community groups.

Focus on the messengers

Make sure local news is sharing accurate and timely information. (Americans still believe that, on average, local reporters are more caring, trustworthy, and unbiased than their national counterparts.⁸¹) Some city employees, such as librarians, parks and recreation leaders, and first responders, enjoy a high degree of public trust, making them potentially effective messengers.⁸² Faith leaders, neighborhood associations, and those who work with seniors, youth, and refugee and immigrant communities are all potentially valuable to city leaders as misinformation busters. Just as some cities have created “[chief storyteller](#)” roles, there may be a role for a “chief debunker” who can keep an ear to the ground and act to counter misinformation early through campaigns and strategically deployed messaging.

Many of the resources developed during the pandemic offer good general guidance for handling misinformation and disinformation:

- [COVID-19 Vaccine Toolkit for Mayors](#)
- [Winning Public Trust in the Age of COVID-19](#)
- Handout from the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership’s session on [COVID-19 in the Post-Truth Era](#)

The Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School also publishes up-to-date, interdisciplinary peer-reviewed research on misinformation in the [Misinformation Review](#).

Logistics

Even the most thoughtfully designed engagement efforts can be undermined by failures on the logistical side. Ensure that your choices about venue, vendors, music, food, and format for events communicate the city’s values, priorities, and respect for residents. While this guide cannot anticipate every logistical need, we offer below some guidance and key questions on logistical questions that arise frequently in planning for civic engagement. Paying close attention to these matters will help ensure that you reach your target audience and align with participants on expectations.

Timing

Choosing a time for an engagement event or the public launch of an initiative is a strategic calculation. Select a time that helps you maximize attention and attendance.

Key Questions:

- Are members of your target audience likely to be working or otherwise unavailable during this time?
- Have you checked for conflicts with cultural and religious holidays or observances?
- Have you checked for conflicts with other public events that might be of interest to your target audience?
- Have you aligned on timing with community partners and other stakeholders in city government?
- Are there recent, current, or anticipated news stories related to the subject of the engagement that you can leverage or should be prepared to respond to?

Location

City hall is a convenient location for those who work there, but it is often preferable to host events in community locations, especially those frequented by your target audience. Choose venues that are welcoming and conveniently located for the community members you want to reach.

Key Questions:

- Is a central location preferable or is there a neighborhood venue that aligns with your subject and/or audience? Do you need multiple events in multiple neighborhoods?
- How is the space set up? Will you need to modify the setup in any way?
- What are your audio/visual and tech needs, and can the venue provide/accommodate these, or do you need outside vendors/volunteers?
- Do you need to incorporate assistive technologies for accessibility?
- Who owns the space? Will the city be paying to use it?
- Is the space named after someone? If so, how do participants feel about this person in this particular community?
- Who will greet and orient participants?
- Does the location have a separate space where childcare can be provided?
- Is there security present? How will the presence or absence of security affect participants' comfort?
- Is this location accessible by public transit?
- Is this location accessible for people with physical disabilities?

Outreach and collaboration

Think strategically and creatively about the content of the invitations as well as who delivers it and how it gets disseminated. Communicate early and often with community partners to ensure messaging and expectations are aligned and clear.

Key Questions:

- What form(s) of communication will help you reach your participants?
- What is the informational content of the invitation? Are the goals and subject of the engagement clear? Are the time and place (including any virtual participation options) easy to find?
- Is it clear how to participate and whether there are virtual options for those who cannot attend an event in person?
- Is there superfluous information you could eliminate from the invitation?
- If you have partnered with community organizations, how are you acknowledging their participation? Have you sought permission to use partner organizations' materials (logos, text, photos)?
- How are you utilizing your partners and their networks to disseminate the invitation and relevant information? Have you checked for alignment in messaging?
- Is there a way for potential participants to contact you and/or partner organizations with questions?
- Are the graphics and language motivating and accessible to your target audience?^{iv}
- Who will deliver this invitation, and through what channels?
- Are you asking people to RSVP? Is the RSVP process clear and simple?
- Is there a chance the event will be rescheduled (due to weather, for example)? If so, does the invitation provide an alternate date and time, or a way to check the status of the event beforehand?
- Are digital invitations accessible across devices and communication methods (e.g., email, mobile, SMS)?
- Are invitations available in multiple languages (and if so, is it clear whether or not will you be providing interpretation at the event)?

^{iv} Recent [preliminary research](#) by Elizabeth Linos, Jessica Lasky-Fink, Chris Larkin, Lindsay Moore, and Elspeth Kirkman documents a “formality effect” where, contrary to common assumptions, more formal written communications from government are more likely to prompt a response from recipients than communications that are less formal in wording and/or appearance.

Format

Choose a format that encourages interaction and participation opportunities for all attendees. Take extra care to make sure your plans do not end up excluding participants with disabilities or language/literacy challenges.

Key Questions:

- Is there a skilled moderator who is respectful, inclusive, and addresses conflict appropriately?
- How will you mix presentation and discussion/deliberation?
- Are there elected representatives or city officials present?
- Will there be group discussion/work? If so, will you let participants self-select, or will you assign randomly or based on certain criteria? Will there be assigned facilitators in each group? Will you need to include other assigned roles (timekeeper, notetaker, reporter, etc.)?
- Are there guiding norms you want participants to agree to? Is there an opportunity for participation in forming norms?
- How will you ensure equitable participation among attendees?
- Are there refreshments? If so, who provides them and how are they served?

Cost to participants

Real and perceived costs of participation (e.g., childcare, transportation, lost wages) affect residents' willingness to attend. Taking steps to mitigate costs or compensate people for their time demonstrates respect for participants' contributions.

Key Questions:

- Can you provide transportation support and/or on-site childcare?
- Can you offer stipends, gift cards, or other kinds of compensation for participants' work and time?
- Are there other ways to honor participants' contributions?

Communication

How you communicate is as important as what you communicate. Finding the right balance between providing enough information for informed participation and keeping it short and simple out of respect for participants' time is critical. Keep in mind that you may need to adapt modes and styles of communication to your target audience. For guidance on effective written communications, see this [overview and checklist from Todd Rogers](#).^v

Key Questions:

- Are the details of the event clear, including how to attend/participate? Is there a written agenda?
- Are there opportunities to provide and receive information in multiple forms (written, digital, verbal)?
- Is there live interpretation for non-English speakers?
- Who is leading the discussion? Are they from the community? If not, have you and your community partners communicated important local context to them?
- Who is speaking and who and what do they represent? Who is not speaking and what message does that send?
- What language are you using to describe and address individuals? Would it be helpful to provide stickers or other ways for participants to signal their preferred pronouns?
- Does the process allow for dialogue?
- Is the relevant information presented in an accessible way, using simple language?
- How will you accommodate residents of different physical abilities, including blind, deaf, and hard-of-hearing community members?

^v The working paper cited in the previous footnote distinguishes formality from complexity, emphasizing that simple language and formality can coexist.

Digital tools

Use digital tools and platforms strategically to reach and engage participants. Have a plan for assisting residents who need support to use digital tools.

Key Questions:

- What platforms are you using to reach participants?
- How are you using digital platforms and tools? For sharing information? Collecting data? Both? Are the tools interactive?
- Is it a privately owned platform? Do you understand its privacy policy?
- Is the city transparent about how it intends to use data and protect residents' privacy?
- Is the tool familiar to users? If not, have you tested it to ensure it is easy to use?
- Will the city or partners provide instruction on using the tool for small groups or individuals? If so, who will provide this support and how/where will they offer it?

Follow-up

Whether the engagement is sustained or a one-off event, it is essential to report back to residents any findings, deliverables, and/or plans related to their input and activities.

Key Questions:

- Is the follow-up information you share straightforward and accessible?
- Are you sharing information through multiple channels and media?
- Is there an opportunity to simplify the presentation of the data?
- If you would like community members to use/interact with the data in some way, is that clear? Is it easy for them to do?
- Does the information provided make it clear how residents' feedback has been incorporated?
- Is the city the best messenger for the information you want to share? Is there an opportunity for a partner to share the information?

Internal Organization

Understanding the unique political circumstances and organizational dynamics within city hall will be critical to laying a strong foundation for civic engagement efforts. Make sure departments and individual colleagues with a stake or role in engagement activities are on board with the plan and clear about the why, what, who, and how. Internal capacity as well as budgetary and procedural constraints within city departments can make or break engagement efforts, so it is important to be very clear about the parameters of the project. Below are some ideas for how to work within city government to support community and resident engagement efforts.

Don't wait to build internal support

As you engage and build partnerships with outside organizations, do the same internally. Invite internal partners to meetings with outside groups, provide spaces for them to hear from the community, and make them a part of managing and setting priorities for engagement to ensure buy-in. This will also help you prevent or respond quickly to misunderstandings or disagreements. Hearing directly from residents and feeling mutually accountable for addressing their concerns can support more honest and transparent internal dialogue.

Clarify objectives with your colleagues

Explain the specific goals of engagement as they relate to the engagement subject and the broader democratic goals the engagement might advance. You could also point out that engagement can have many benefits for participants including improved psychological, physical, and behavioral health and well-being. It can also save money for the government by ensuring better communication with residents before issues become real problems.

Start small

Department heads and staff will have varying attitudes about and experience with civic engagement. If you are encountering fear or skepticism from city staff already grappling with budget constraints and other challenges, start small or begin with a pilot process to demonstrate the merits of civic engagement and build relationships. Are you having a meeting with outside organizations where you could include internal partners? Is there a promising project underway that could include more internal colleagues? Do you hold office hours for residents where you could invite your internal colleagues?

Build civic engagement efforts into existing priorities

City budgets are tight, and city leaders do not often have the luxury of building additional programs or hiring staff to manage civic engagement. Integrating thoughtful civic engagement practices into high-priority work can facilitate city government's work in key areas of concern.

Below are some questions to help you anticipate and manage some of the internal challenges that tend to arise.

Key Questions:

- How does this engagement effort inform and advance city hall's priorities? Can those priorities act as a unifying vision for collaboration between different departments?
- Which actors in city government outside of the mayor's office need to be involved in managing and setting priorities for the engagement to be effective?
- Are there opportunities to embed engagement strategies, tactics, tools, and objectives into other work across councils, commissions, and boards?
- Which internal allies could you partner with to expand your reach?
- Who are the internal experts on the engagement subject (the "what") and how can you leverage their expertise for better information and outcomes?
- How, when, and where does this specific engagement plan integrate with ongoing processes of city government?
- Who from city government is leading this initiative and whom do they report to? Is this position time-bound? What training or background does that individual have in the community and with civic engagement?
- Is there budget available to advance your civic engagement goals? Do you have the necessary staff and resources to support the engagement and follow up?

Evaluation

Evaluating your civic engagement effort is important for two reasons: First, it helps you learn about what works and what doesn't so you can adapt accordingly. Second, it can help build trust with community members by demonstrating your commitment to getting better results. Being transparent about the process even if—or particularly *when*—it is less than successful can boost the city's credibility with partners and residents.

Whether your engagement project is short-term or ongoing, have a plan to measure progress against clearly stated goals using agreed-upon indicators, to share your findings, and to include residents in a review process that allows for joint learning, future planning, and process improvement. Take care to explain how residents' views, feedback, and input have been integrated throughout the process.

Measuring and understanding who *does not* participate and why is as important as measuring who does participate and what they contribute to and gain from the experience. When collected, organized, and shared responsibly, this kind of data can help cities and residents see, understand, and work to reduce inequities. Wherever possible, disaggregate data based on demographics with enough granularity to see and understand

impacts on different groups (while protecting privacy). Your framework for evaluation should pay special attention to groups that risk being underrepresented through traditional data collection. (For guidance on equity in data, see the [Data Equity Framework from We All Count](#).)

The metrics you choose for evaluation will largely depend on the specifics of each individual project, but in every case should be closely tied to the theory of change outlined in your answers to the four questions: *If we engage (who) to work on (what) by doing (how), the outcome will be (why)*. Ensure that you are collecting sufficient data to provide insights and fill gaps in your knowledge and understanding for each variable in the equation. Keeping the four key design questions in mind can help you maintain focus as you identify metrics and indicators, track progress, and improve upon your civic engagement efforts. Use your energy, time, and resources for evaluation strategically, be realistic about what can be measured, and be clear and transparent about the purpose of the evaluation.

The questions you answered in the self-assessment portion of this guide—mapping out the historical context for engagement and locating your city’s stage of development (nascent, intermediate, or mature) with regard to civic engagement processes—can serve as a baseline to track progress over time. These level-setting questions and the self-assessment rubric can also be repurposed for the evaluation of newly designed and implemented efforts.

Working towards increasingly inclusive, collaborative, and integrated engagement practices takes time and practice. Evaluation may be a long-term process requiring both quantitative and qualitative data, over repeated and sustained time intervals. Setting realistic benchmark indicators aligned with the four design questions over time intervals will help you continue to refine efforts.

Conclusion

The crises of the early 2020s have underscored both the need to work actively with residents to address public problems and the challenges of orchestrating meaningful engagement opportunities. To understand what is on people's minds, generate solutions to problems, mobilize capacity to coproduce desired social outcomes, and make our cities more equitable and just, city leaders need to be thoughtful and strategic in designing their efforts and creating conditions for meaningful and inclusive participation. The health of local democracy depends on city leaders' ability to design and manage engagement with intentionality. Avoiding the misalignment between process design and goals is a critical first step.

This guide distinguished five high-level goals and four key design questions to help city leaders align civic engagement processes and desired outcomes. Every city is unique in its mix of people, problems, and priorities, but this framework for examining engagement practices and identifying pathways for improvement and innovation can help all cities become more democratic and finely attuned to the needs of their people. The examples provided offer inspiration and demonstrate how the framework can be used to understand the logic behind engagement efforts and ask the right questions.

Large numbers of people are engaging in civic life. In many parts of the US, voter turnout is approaching levels not seen since the 1960s, especially among young people.⁸³ Many cities have seen a rise in protests and demonstrations. Bringing people together to imagine a safer, more just, and sustainable civic life together is an urgent matter for city leaders. If leaders do not engage the public thoughtfully and meaningfully, the credibility and legitimacy of city government and its relationship with residents will continue to erode. To repair and rebuild a healthy, functioning democratic polity for a new era, city leaders need engagement tools in their hands. We hope this guide helps to serve that function, and that the coming years bring you and your communities productive engagements, innovative solutions, and strong partnerships.

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