

A Guide to Engaging the Community in Your Project

In Creative Placemaking Toolbox

The success of your project depends largely on how well you are able to engage your community. Community/stakeholder input can help you shape your project vision, ensure build support for your development ideas. Ideally, your community should be involved from a very early stage; this will help you to form lasting relationships with community addition to the neighbourhood that everyone can be proud of.

Introduction

With all stakeholders, your objectives are to build credibility and trust, develop supporters and champions for your project, and make sure that the needs and wishes of your stakeholders engagement is part of a larger stakeholder engagement strategy that begins at the outset of a project and continues well after the bricks and mortar are in place. Artscape's approach to community engagement is ongoing and cyclical.

Conducting a community consultation process will allow you to form relationships with community stakeholders and to leverage existing community assets and resources for your project. Identify potential risks or threats, such as individuals or organizations that may have concerns about your project or other external issues that may hinder the success of your project. It is particularly important to ensure that your project's vision is understood, shared and supported in the community. Community involvement in the building design process is also important, particularly in the building design process, physical impact in the community, either in its size or architectural form, or in increased traffic, noise, etc.

A comprehensive consultation process allows community members with ideas and concerns to be heard, and even if community members don't ultimately agree with the decisions that are made, they can understand the process of getting there, and the tradeoffs that were weighed. Adequate consultation with the community, through a [charrette](#) or [cultural asset mapping](#), can also help ensure that your project can establish relationships that can take you through any bumps during the operations of your project.

Many savvy communities will already be familiar with the municipal processes of engagement, as well as how to make any grievances known to local planners and politicians, so your project can benefit from municipal consultation and sow goodwill in the neighbourhood.

Community engagement and consultation will take place throughout your [pre-project development](#) and [design and development](#) phases. It may form parts of the contextual research and [study](#), architectural design studies and other phases of project development.

Ensuring Your Project Responds to Local Needs

From the earliest stages of pre-project development, you will need to ensure that the project vision responds to the particular identity, assets, resources and needs of the community it serves. To ensure you and your neighbours, make sure that you understand the community – the local history, demographics, socio-economics, culture and languages, etc. This will help you overcome barriers to engaging your target audience and identify factors that have an impact on community needs and wishes.

Just as you need to understand the broad context of the community in which you plan to develop your project, you will absolutely need to dedicate time and resources to identifying the context of the community upon. At Artscape, we see cultural asset mapping as an effective tool in the early stages of any development.

Click here to learn more about how Cultural Asset Mapping can help identify the cultural assets and creative resources you can build on in the early stages of any development.

Understanding the Community Context

There are a number of questions that you can ask to help determine the characteristics of your community and work out where your interests intersect with the needs of the local community.

- What are the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the area?
- What are the social, economic and environmental challenges or priorities in this neighbourhood?
- What is happening in terms of neighbourhood improvement and real estate development?
- What is the backbone of community economic development?
- What employment growth strategies are promoted in the community?

At Artscape, we dedicate both time and resources to this critical early stage of research. You will likely find that your local municipality can provide you with economic, social and demographic data. You may also want to talk to local business organizations (for example, the local business improvement association or BIA), any major local social planning charities, your local school board, school and police. The organizations responsible for community development, local economic development and culture. You will also need to understand your local planning and real estate development situation.

To find out more about this, read [What Should I Consider When Selecting a Site?](#) and [How Can I Use Planning Tools and Incentives?](#)

Defining Your Community Consultation Plan

When your contextual research and cultural asset mapping is complete, you should have a good sense of the key local issues and of the cultural and broader context in which you will be of the local groups to engage – local arts organizations, resident associations, local merchant associations, architectural conservancy groups, local politicians, social service agencies, grass roots groups. You should then develop an implementation plan and schedule for consultation and engagement activities.

The aims of a community consultation plan are to:

- Engage community members in the development of a strong shared vision
- Inform and educate the public about your project and its construction
- Bring to life the mission/vision/values of your development
- Engender a sense of community ownership, pride and stewardship of the project
- Create excitement around opportunities for the community to use and participate in your project and ensure its success as a social anchor and outlet for local artistic and cultural expression
- Create strong relationships between your organization, your tenants, the local community and local arts and cultural groups
- Engage youth and children to become active participants in arts and cultural activity within their neighbourhood
- Seek champions and an ever-expanding circle of friends/supporters for your project
- Build and maintain momentum for the project

Your community consultation plan should outline a schedule of consultation events and communications, ideally coordinated with approval and construction milestones, and regular communication with the community.

Each stage of a project may have its own group of unique players and may require different types of community consultation methods that can range from one-on-one interviews to small group discussions. Your implementation plan should therefore also define the various methods of consultation with the community as a whole or with subgroups at each project stage or milestone.

Consultation Goals and Methods

Community consultation methods should be chosen based on desired goals, which can range from informing and educating to gathering input, seeking discussion and direction and encouraging participation.

understand each of the methods to determine which one is right for the information that you are trying to obtain and goal you are trying to achieve. For example, a newsletter to the community about the project, whereas a needs assessment survey or one-on-one interviews may help to identify some key issues and needs in the community.

Just as importantly, you will need to give careful thought to the best methods to engage the diversity of individuals and groups in the community with whom you will need to consult. For young children will likely be different from your approach to consulting with youth in the community. Make sure that you use the evidence from your contextual research to inform your following:

- What languages are spoken in this community? How can I make sure that print and other forms of communication are accessible to as many community members as possible?
- What physical barriers might prevent community members from participating in consultation opportunities and how can I best address these? This will include thinking about the need for access to public transit.
- What is the best location for a meeting or event? Is it well known, accessible by public transit, physically accessible and in an area generally regarded as “safe”?
- What is the best time of day for a meeting or event? You should always consider the difficulties that local community members with jobs outside the area will have in attending daytime meetings or events might be more accessible.
- What is the tone of my meeting, event or other form of communication? Is it friendly, welcoming and informative or full of jargon and difficult to understand?
- What other established organizations in the community can help encourage people to attend and/or “host” a meeting or event?

Informing and Educating

Examples of informing and educating might be:

- Sharing the vision, values and goals that inform your project’s design and future operations
- Keeping the community up to date on the process and progress of the project’s development
- Providing information about opportunities for further consultation and participation.

Many of the methods for informing and educating are able to reach many people at once, providing a good way to kick-off a community process, and to keep neighbourhoods updated on

- Newsletters/Flyers

These can be dropped off on postal walks to all households and businesses in a neighbourhood. A good way to widely advertise a schedule of consultation events or timeline for consultation

- Information Sessions/Town Hall Meetings

At these meetings the project team makes an informative presentation, with an opportunity to answer questions from the audience. As with all community consultations, those who are most interested and impacted. If a project is controversial or contentious, this format can provide an opportunity for opponents to dominate the discussion.

- Information Open Houses

These sessions are typically held over the course of an afternoon and evening, and are a drop-in format, with information boards and staff on hand to answer questions. This format can be effective by providing a very tangible way for people with concerns to be heard, and to have a true one-on-one conversation about the project. It is important for all staff to be well-versed and knowledgeable so that there is no inconsistency or confusion created. It is also recommended to provide opportunities for feedback, so that people can think about what they learned and provide constructive input.

- E-Bulletins/Social Media Updates

These depend on gathering a list of email addresses and subscribers, and is a good way to provide ongoing information to those who have already attended consultation sessions.

- Hoarding and Signage

Once your project is under construction, it will require some kind of protective hoarding, which provides an opportunity to include images, information, website addresses, etc. Hoarding can be decorated by local artists or neighbourhood kids, which can tie into your community event program.

- Community Events

Consider participating in already-organized community events such as sidewalk sales and festivals. Have an information table and perhaps some project-related activities for young people. Displays, renderings, etc., are good props to have on hand for neighbourhood events. You can also create your own community event, perhaps an open house and tour of your project site pre-rendering.

Gathering Input and Understanding Local Needs and Issues

Gathering local input may be useful to the project team to help understand community needs and issues, determine the best design and program of the building, or to get feedback on preliminary plans for a new business or operating model, or for new programming ideas. Some consultation methods to consider:

- Interviews/Focus Groups/Roundtable Discussions

These are face-to-face meetings, either one-on-one or in small groups (up to 12 people). They can focus on one main theme or question during the project planning, or they can be used to explore various issues. Leaders and learn about any opportunities and threats to the project. It is often wise to mix people of different backgrounds and perspectives in these sessions, to enable different viewpoints among community stakeholders of the various trade-offs and balances that need to be taken into account when making project decisions.

- Email/Web Surveys

These can be accessed through your project website or sent to your mailing list. Surveys need to be carefully constructed so that you can easily compile and interpret the answers. Free [Monkey](#), [Zoomerang](#) and [ESurveysPro](#).

- [Request for Expressions of Interest](#)

The Request for Expressions of Interest (REOI) is a briefing document that may be used as a tool to stimulate and assess interest in a project and to solicit useful information from interested parties. This document is a tool and how Artscape uses it in the pre-project development phase.

Seeking Discussion and Direction from the Community

You may wish to seek community direction on the vision for your project, specific design elements, programming goals, opportunities for public art or animation of public spaces, or other aspects of the community the use and time allocation of a community-accessible space. If you've chosen your tenants or building users, you may want to seek their advice and direction with respect to the space and ensure that they will be able to make best use of the space provided to them. Methods include:

- “Visioning” Charrette

A visioning charrette is a technique for consulting with some of the most interested community stakeholders early in a project. It typically involves full-day, intensive meetings, where project leaders, community members and potential tenants are invited to gather and discuss issues, challenges and desires related to the project. A successful vision charrette achieves a shared vision and positive attitudes between different community stakeholders by providing a common understanding of issues, opportunities and challenges. This process is also extremely useful for identifying and addressing community concerns. A charrette can also help the project team understand the steps required to arrive at the shared vision.

[Click here](#) to learn more about how to host and plan a Visioning Charrette.

- “Design” Charrette

Similar to the visioning charrette described above, a design charrette is used to solve a complex design problem, often at the neighbourhood scale with a focus on how the physical plan affects the local community. It requires thorough preparation of drawings and design limitations by the project team, and can last a full day, or even two days, depending on the level of complexity.

- Roundtable Discussions

As noted above, these are ideal for groups of 12 or less, with a mix of perspectives and viewpoints. At this stage of consultation with the community, it is best to limit the topic to one or two issues that those who have been most involved, as well as those who may have outstanding concerns on the particular topic you are seeking to address.

- **Small Group Workshops**

These are ideal for groups of 20 to 30 people. Small workshops are similar to but less intensive than a charrette, and can be useful for larger groups or if there is more than one related question/answer period, and the participants are then divided into smaller groups to discuss specific questions. The groups can all have the same question(s), or each group can be asked a different question. A facilitator or group keeps the discussion moving and on track. Each group records their main points and then reports back to the larger group near the end of the session. The reports are typically reviewed by the project team. As above, your aim is to invite those with the most to contribute, and those with ongoing concerns.

The following websites provide useful information and resources on hosting a charrette:

Canadian Mortgage and Housing Council

Sustainable Community Planning and Development: Design Charrette Planning Guide

<http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/odpub/pdf/62779.pdf>

National Charrette Institute

<http://www.charretteinstitute.org/>

Community Stewardship

At Artscape, community engagement continues throughout the design and development phase and into the operational life of the building. Community stewardship through involvement, ownership and decision-making in the project. Opportunities can include membership of a community steering committee during a project's pre-project development and design and development phases, membership on your organization's board of directors and involvement in programming and operations through membership of a community association, community programming or other activities.

Recording Consultation Results and Closing the Feedback Loop

In general, it is wise to keep a detailed record of the consultation activities you've undertaken as a template for future work and as a demonstration of the work you've done with the community. You should keep a written record of the meetings you've held and the groups you've consulted, as well as an archive of meeting notes and drawings, emails and comments from participants.

Your organization may even seek recognition and awards for an exemplary consultation process from groups such as the [Ontario Professional Planners Association](#).

Once you have completed a consultation activity, compile the comments and feedback into a format you can use for decision-making. You can begin by transcribing any meeting notes, a categories. This will allow you to see areas of agreement or of contradiction among the community groups you've consulted. Where there is consensus that fits with your project's vision disagreement, you will need to work with your project team and other stakeholders to come to a decision. It's a good idea to let your community stakeholders know about your decision a noted in the beginning of this section, this allows your community stakeholders to feel heard and to follow the process. If they don't agree with the outcome they will at least understand

Depending on the level of involvement of your community group, you may wish to report back the main findings to ensure that you have heard and interpreted them correctly. This can b email or posted on a website. You may also wish to include the main points in the next newsletter to the community group. Hosting an open house or town hall event can be one of the be community, particularly after a lengthy or substantial consultation process.