

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RESOURCE GUIDE

CREATING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HIGH-PERFORMING PARKS



**NRPA** National Recreation  
and Park Association

*Because everyone deserves a great park*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) has developed this Community Engagement Resource Guide to provide park and recreation professionals with a roadmap to implement equitable and inclusive community engagement strategies around the planning, design, construction, maintenance and activation of park projects and park plans. NRPA designed the guide specifically to address barriers that hinder or prevent park and recreation agencies' ability to work collaboratively with community members to utilize their park spaces as local solutions for their community.

This resource guide divides the engagement process into four major themes that will help park and recreation professionals better meet the needs of all people who are impacted by projects and plans:

## **PG 4** INTERNAL ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING

This section addresses the internal barriers to community engagement, including staffing, funding, leadership support and building a community engagement plan.

## **PG 11** BUILDING TRUST WITH COMMUNITIES

This section provides strategies for overcoming the community barriers to community engagement, including acknowledging past experiences, involving community stakeholders, being transparent and delivering on promises.

## **PG 15** COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

This section overviews the importance of a mixed method approach and flexible communication style to ensure diverse opinions are heard.

## **PG 20** EVALUATION

The final section shows how to collect, analyze and communicate the data gathered through community engagement activities to determine if goals set in the planning phase were met.

Throughout this guide, NRPA provides tips, best practices and case studies from the field that inform how to design community engagement efforts to ensure all people feel welcome and engaged in park projects and spaces. It is important to note that every community is different and faces unique challenges, so the information provided in this resource is meant to be tailored and adapted to meet the specific and unique needs of each community.

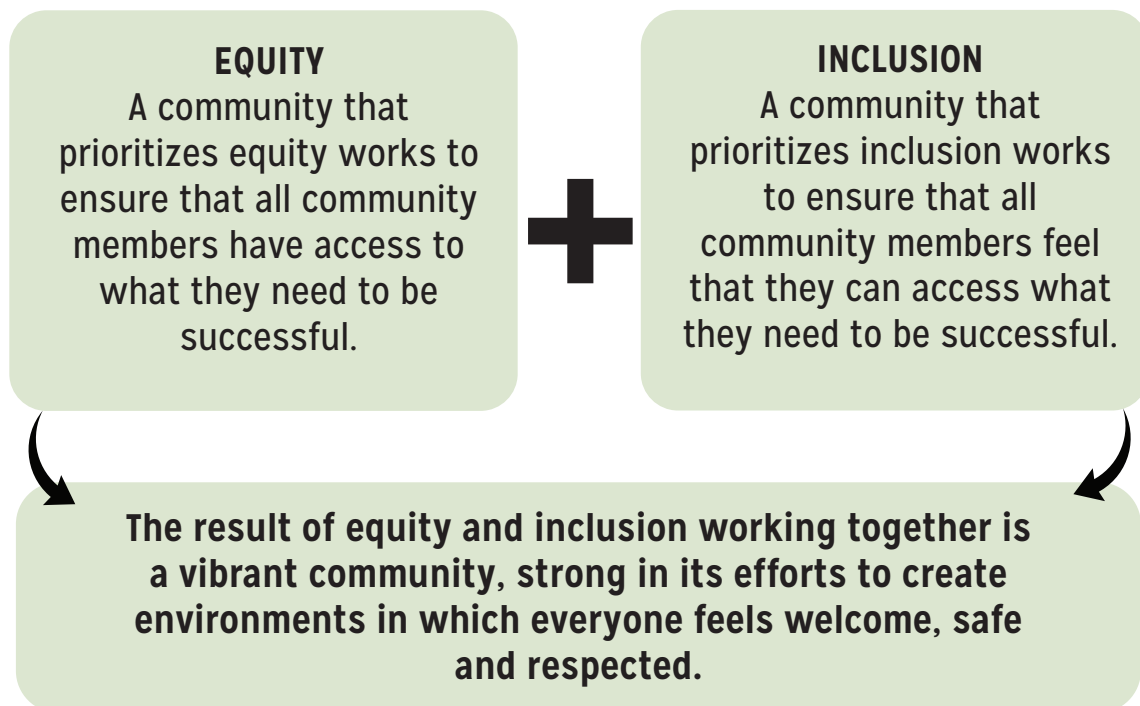


# INTRODUCTION

True to the very philosophy of public parks and recreation is the idea that all people – no matter the color of their skin, age, gender, income level or ability – have access to and feel welcome in the places, programs and facilities that make their lives and communities great. Local park and recreation agencies work diligently to make this vision a reality in communities across the country, striving to ensure that their sites provide the health, environmental, social and cultural benefits that their communities deserve. Equitable and inclusive community engagement is central to this vision and is fundamental to establishing quality parks that meet the needs of all constituents.

**An inclusive and meaningful engagement process ensures that our parks and public spaces are created by the people they are intended to serve.** Many community engagement attempts have failed to truly represent and reach people who have experience many types of inequities and are at highest risk of living in poor environments and experiencing negative health outcomes (e.g. people of color, low-income communities, people with physical and cognitive disabilities, etc. as defined in NRPA's Parks for Inclusion Policy Guide). Often, this may result in a lack of trust in local government and projects that do not reflect the needs or desires of the community they impact. Building a community engagement approach that recognizes these past shortcomings, helps to establish relationships with and engages all members of the community, aligns with community goals, is inclusive and transparent, addresses unintended consequences as they arise (e.g., fear of displacement because of increased investment in neighborhood public spaces) and delivers results that can have profound effects on our parks and on the health of the community.

## NRPA'S VISION FOR EQUITY AND INCLUSION



## MAKING THE CASE FOR EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Equitable and inclusive community engagement is an ongoing and proactive process of working collaboratively with all people in a community to build relationships and capacity, create solutions and foster a sense of ownership of public parks through the planning, design, construction, maintenance and activation of park spaces.

### BENEFITS OF EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT

- Build trust among community members and park and recreation agencies
- Strengthen community capacity including via civic participation engagement and workforce development skills (e.g. voting, volunteering and park maintenance and stewardship)
- Ensure that parks and funding are distributed more equitably across jurisdictions
- Develop a community's sense of ownership over park spaces
- Decrease the prevalence of unforeseen conflicts or problems
- Create higher-performing public parks that are reflective of communities
- Improve the environmental, physical, social and economic health of communities
- Increase community participation in parks and public spaces

## HOW DO YOU DEFINE COMMUNITY?

A community is any group of people who share common characteristics such as, but not limited to, location, age, race, ethnicity, ability, shared experiences, interests or other commonalities. The community impacted by projects will be different for a small pocket or neighborhood park compared to a large regional park or a park master plan. For all parks or plans, no matter the size or location, vulnerable populations should always be prioritized.

### LOCATION

People who live within a 10-minute walk of a park stand to benefit the most given the strong connections between walking distance to parks and the social, physical, economic and environmental health benefits<sup>1,2</sup>. However, the community closest to the park is also most vulnerable to negative consequences such as displacement<sup>3</sup>.

### VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

While parks provide numerous benefits, it is essential that people impacted by poor environmental conditions and/or public health threats, or people who are socially isolated from communities, are well-represented in the engagement process. These communities have historically had little voice in public decisions but stand to benefit the most from the outcomes. By including them in the engagement process, it may improve outcomes for all.

<sup>1</sup> NRPA, 2018. The Economic Impact of Local Parks. [www.nrpa.org/publications-research/research-papers/the-economic-impact-of-local-parks/](http://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/research-papers/the-economic-impact-of-local-parks/)

<sup>2</sup> NRPA, 2016. Making the Case: Parks & Health. [www.nrpa.org/our-work/Three-Pillars/health-wellness/ParksandHealth/](http://www.nrpa.org/our-work/Three-Pillars/health-wellness/ParksandHealth/)

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University, 2016. Measuring the Impact of The 606. [www.housingstudies.org/media/filer\\_public/2016/10/31/ihs\\_measuring\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_the\\_606.pdf](http://www.housingstudies.org/media/filer_public/2016/10/31/ihs_measuring_the_impact_of_the_606.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Rouse, David, 2018. Social Equity, Parks and Gentrification. Parks and Recreation magazine. [www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2018/july/social-equity-parks-and-gentrification/](http://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2018/july/social-equity-parks-and-gentrification/)

# INTERNAL ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING

Community engagement can seem like an overwhelming task for park projects, especially with limited staff capacity and project funds. However, for these projects to be fully embraced by the community, community members must be engaged in every phase of the project and from the very beginning. Community engagement is an ongoing process that requires patience and resources, so following specific steps prior to jumping into engagement will make the process easier to manage. These steps include:

## ASSESSING STAFF CAPACITY

## SECURING FUNDING

## BUILDING LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

## CREATING A PLAN WITH CLEAR GOALS

### ASSESSING STAFF CAPACITY

**Having one or two staff who reflect the community and are dedicated to community engagement will increase your agency's accountability and unify your approach with one central message, helping to enhance the community's trust in your agency to follow through with projects.** Community members will likely provide more honest feedback and your agency will spend its resources on projects that best meet the needs of the community or have community support.

#### Hiring Community Outreach Staff

If your agency does not already have a staff member whose sole job responsibility is to interact with the community, hiring a community outreach specialist is ideal. When hiring someone to serve in this role, write a clear job description outlining expectations, including specific qualities that make this person well-suited to build meaningful relationships with the community. Make sure you consider candidates who reflect the culture of, reside in and/or have existing relationships within the community they are serving, especially when working with vulnerable populations. While park and recreation subject matter expertise may be a valuable quality, this expertise can be learned through trainings and experience. Characteristics such as strong interpersonal skills and community organizing experience are critical to this role and may be more important factors to consider when hiring a candidate.

The ideal qualities of community outreach staff are as follows:

- Ability to creatively plan, coordinate and facilitate community meetings and events
- Strong interpersonal skills, such as listening, communication and problem-solving
- Highly motivated to implement change
- Representative of the population they serve, including the language(s) spoken
- Resilient to push back and/or criticism

Having at least one or two community outreach specialists on staff is ideal but financing these positions can be difficult. To move toward hiring community engagement staff, recognize it as a long-term goal for your agency, create an action plan and get leadership buy-in to help secure funding for these positions. While strategizing about hiring community outreach staff, you can begin forming relationships with community members in other ways.

## Use Current Staff

Involve current staff who already have connections with community groups, leaders and youth and provide them with training opportunities on leadership, communication and equity. Encourage them to think beyond their day-to-day work to how they can make an impact in the community.

## Establish an Advisory Council

Creating a community advisory council is another way to increase your agency's capacity to build relationships with community members, lead meetings and solicit feedback. The structure of your advisory council can also help sustain and institutionalize engagement efforts far beyond a single project or administration. It is important to address the following when setting up a council:

- Selection method for advisory members (voting, appointment, open volunteer, etc.)
- Criteria for demographic, geographic and other types of representation on the council
- Ways to incentivize participation
- Scope of work
- Length of service

Be sure that however you structure the council, you engage diverse community leaders and partners in the development of the council. Work to build trusting relationships with them and rely on their community expertise and networks to help recruit others who are passionate about creating local solutions. The people on this council should embody different interests of the community, speak their language and live in the neighborhood. Provide them with meaningful opportunities to make decisions, so they know their opinions are valued and they become your advocates in the field. This council can act as a sounding board for your ideas, give credibility to your agency's initiatives and relieve some work from your team.

Recreation center staff members are viewed as trusted community leaders and are a great resource to lean on. Every day, they interact with community members, who often rely on recreation centers for food access, activity, public information and learning opportunities.



# CASE STUDY

## DEDICATED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STAFF

### **Perspectives from a Community Outreach Coordinator, Park District of Oak Park** **Contributing author: Cate Reading, Community Outreach Coordinator**

The Village of Oak Park Illinois, population 52,000, is a western suburb of Chicago. This typically engaged community historically prioritizes diversity and inclusion as well as green space. The Park District of Oak Park identified the need for a dedicated Community Outreach staff person primarily because of ongoing facility and programming improvements and an increase in collaborative opportunities in the community. They started the search by looking at existing staff and identified the talent for this position through self-identification as well as continuous solicitation of internal feedback through surveys. The position was created in 4th quarter of 2017 with a 90-day trial period to confirm a good fit for both the agency, the candidate and the community. Cate was heavily involved with the community through the school system, the Park District Citizens Committee and as an employee of the Park District so she was a natural fit for the Community Outreach Coordinator position.

Just as the seasons and programs in the parks vary, so does the range in the duties of a Community Outreach Specialist. Communication with other public serving agencies and organizations is the most critical element. There are members of every town and neighborhood who are working toward the same goal of deeper community engagement including public and private schools, libraries, public and social service providers and recreation providers. Each agency has a variety of contact opportunities. When each of those agencies prioritizes coordinated engagement, those efforts yield exponentially higher and stronger results!

The ideal qualities of creativity, motivation, communication, representation and resilience are absolutely crucial and all of that implies remaining flexible. The ability to change gears and direction with grace and understanding is also a key to success. For example, in a given day, I may communicate with the Village Clerk, Library Outreach and the Township manager to gather materials for a New Resident Meet and Greet event in a park district facility or use social media to address public inquires and share information about scheduled maintenance needs and also attend an evening meeting of the Community of Congregations. This level of participation allows my agency to be considered a partner and a resource in the community and enhances the many relationships that other staff engage in.

The element that contributes the most to the success of this position is trust. There must be trust that is built between the agency and the community but just as important is the internal trust between staff. When Directors and Managers model that they value the position of Community Outreach, that trust strengthens the public's perceived value and trust in the agency. The internal champions of the Community Outreach staff have a very real impact on the strength of the relationships that exist. Differentiating between Customer Service and Community Outreach is essential and allows both departments to maximize results and outcomes.

The business of the Park District is to provide access to wellness and quality of life. The sometimes-intangible contribution of intentionally creating the sense of belonging and value results in very tangible increases in the health and diversity of both our agency and those we serve and therefore enhances the experience of each and every person who encounters our staff, volunteers, facilities and programs.

# CASE STUDY

## ESTABLISHING AN ADVISORY COUNCIL

### **Community-led Park Advisory Groups; City of Covington Parks and Recreation, Kentucky**

**Contributing author: Rosie Santos, Parks and Recreation Manager**

The Midwestern city of Covington, Kentucky, with a population of 41,000, is located on the banks of the Ohio River, just across from Cincinnati, Ohio. It did not have a citywide park's board or a formal community engagement strategy, which resulted in inequities in the distribution and quality of parks. Like other cities, the model was top-down decision making or holding traditional community meetings that did not lead to meaningful involvement of the community. Wanting to honor its value of inclusive planning, Covington decided to start a resident-led park advisory group.

The city put out a request for people to join an 11-person park advisory group to objectively analyze city parks and prioritize redevelopment projects. Group members serve three-year terms and are recruited based on their experience in at least one of the following areas:

- Agriculture, trees, horticulture and/or trails
- Youth and family interests like pools, playgrounds, sports or recreation
- Adult interests like passive recreation, active recreation or sports
- Covington Independent Public Schools
- Physical design, aesthetics and art incorporation
- Crime prevention through environmental design expertise; community health and park maintenance

The advisory group is charged with assigning parks a "Park Potential Index" based on several factors, including condition, economic development, green infrastructure, crime prevention, health and connectivity improvements and equity. This allows for redevelopment to be prioritized by identified community need.

Once the high-priority areas are identified, the park advisory group forms neighborhood stakeholder groups with trusted community members and offers incentives for participation, such as a \$75 gift card for groceries. The neighborhood stakeholder groups receive feedback from their community and report to the city's park advisory group. In addition, they organize fun, pop-up events to program the parks and gather feedback through prototype projects like temporary garden beds.

The park advisory group has increased buy-in and trust in city park redevelopment projects. Furthermore, it will be central in the development of Covington's first citywide Parks Master Plan and will work with the consultant, as well as continue to manage the community engagement process. The city of Covington's Parks and Recreation Department created an effective model for park development putting community engagement, co-design and responsive construction at the heart of capital development.



## SECURING FUNDING

Project budgets can be tight, and most often funds are only earmarked for direct construction costs. However, if effort is not invested in community engagement, you risk losing community buy-in and ownership from the community. In every phase of the project, budget for community engagement activities, including stipends or gift cards for community participants, to allow for flexibility and the use of a variety of methods to ensure diverse voices are heard. **Leveraging grant funds** and **dedicated internal funds** are two methods to ensure community engagement is adequately funded.

### GRANT FUNDS

When applying for grants from a foundation or government agency, build community engagement funds into the budget as a separate line item, and explain the use and importance of these funds. You can also look for specific grant opportunities dedicated to supporting community engagement activities that can supplement existing project funds. If your agency lacks capacity to actively apply for grants, partner with community-based nonprofits and friends' groups to enhance your fundraising efforts.

### INTERNAL FUNDS

Funding for these activities should also be supported by your agency. This means either shifting a portion of the funds from implementation to engagement or creating a separate pot of money for ongoing engagement and relationship building. Establishing dedicated funding is ideal because it ensures that community engagement will not end when the project is complete and showcases your dedication to the community.

## BUILDING LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

Staffing community engagement positions, budgeting for activities and following through on commitments are easier to accomplish when your leadership values community engagement and input. **To demonstrate why community engagement is not only important to the community, but also the long-term success of projects, invite the mayor's office, other municipal agencies and your leadership to community events.** These events allow leadership to see how parks are celebrated by the community when they are designed to reflect their needs. In addition, when writing park plans and budgets, include community engagement as a key element to inspire leadership and other agencies to take the same approach.

### KEY QUESTIONS FOR INTERNAL ASSESSMENT

- What current staff work closely with the community or represent the community?
- Are there positions we are hiring for that we could prioritize candidates with ideal qualities for community engagement?
- What resources are currently allocated towards community engagement?
- What engagement strategies have worked in the past and which ones haven't?

## CREATING A PLAN WITH CLEAR GOALS

The last step before starting community engagement is creating a clear, goal-oriented plan. Consider the following planning framework, which can be used for both neighborhood-level or park system-planning projects. It is important to note that the plan should reflect the community and that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach.

## Framework for Community Engagement Planning

PLAN ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
<b>Project Description</b>	Detail how the project started and what the project entails.	A park in an underserved neighborhood is up for reinvestment and the agency was tasked to design a new sports amenity in an underutilized open green space.
<b>Budget</b>	Include a project budget in the description to ensure the project is attainable.	The total project budget is \$150,000. Implementation will cost at least \$100,000, leaving \$50,000 for engagement.
<b>Related Community Planning Efforts</b>	Describe any previous plans, investments or community engagement efforts related to the project.	The surrounding neighborhood has received significant investment in the last five years, but the park has not had any investment. The community has been over-surveyed about new local amenities.
<b>Community Sentiment</b>	Understand and document the current community sentiment regarding the project.	The community has voiced concern about gentrification and that the project will not be thoughtfully designed to meet its needs.
<b>Community Participation</b>	Identify the level of participation you are asking of community members in the project and the purpose of engagement. <i>See Community Engagement Spectrum.</i>	The project team needs feedback on what sports amenity the community would utilize. Collaborate with the community to design and develop the project and support community members to make the space their own.
<b>Community Snapshot</b>	Outline the demographics, key leaders and cultural influences of the community. Include race/ethnicity, primary language spoken, age, sex/gender, homeowner/renter, etc. to reveal the character, key players, behavior, assets and challenges of the community.	The primary language spoken by 70 percent of adults surrounding the park is Spanish with a secondary language of Chinese. The project team should conduct the meeting and create materials in Spanish with Chinese translation offered.
<b>Community Engagement Strategies</b>	Identify a mixed method approach by using multiple strategies to ensure diverse voices are heard. Strategies should reflect culture, communication style and preferences, and common communication outlets and values of the community.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Host events with pop-up sports play and culturally relevant food and music geared towards families during weekends at the park.</li> <li>2. Observe how families interact at the park and have one-on-one conversations. Are they kicking around a soccer ball? What are their concerns about the park?</li> <li>3. Partner with local schools and utility provider(s) to send out multilingual mailers to share event information with families.</li> </ol>
<b>Goals and Metrics</b>	Set realistic goals for community engagement, including a timeline to attain them and metrics to measure success.	<p>Goal: To have 100 people ages 25 and under from the park's surrounding underserved neighborhood provide input on the new sports amenity, design and features.</p> <p>Metric: Record demographics of people engaged who were spoken to at events and the park, as well as through surveys. Success is 90 percent of the people engaged were youth ages &lt;25.</p>
<b>Evaluation</b>	Outline the desired information you wish to collect at community engagement events, meetings, one-on-one conversations, etc. such as name, address, comments, needs. Create a plan for collecting and reporting out about community engagement efforts.	<p>Data at the pop-up sports event will be collected via registration, tablet sign in and a concluding survey. Notes will be taken from organic one-on-one conversations.</p> <p>A fun infographic highlighting the community's thoughts will be shared on Facebook after the event.</p>

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SPECTRUM

When planning your community engagement strategies, determine the level of engagement you are seeking from the community using the following spectrum.

PARTICIPATION GOAL	Is it to INFORM the community?	Is it to CONSULT the community?	Is it to INVOLVE the community?	Is it to COLLABORATE with the community?	Is it to SUPPORT the community?
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	A decision is made, and the community needs to be aware but doesn't have the ability to make changes to the decision.	The community is asked to react to something and provide feedback that will shape the outcome.	The community is asked to share their ideas that will help to shape the outcome.	Community members and the agency have a trusting relationship to work together to develop solutions that are best for their community.	The agency provides community members with the tools needed to make decisions.
<b>EXAMPLE</b>	The sports facility will close at 7 p.m. on weekdays and 10 p.m. on weekends.	The agency is asking community members how the current programming at the sports facility could be improved to bolster attendance.	The agency is asking community members what new programming at the sports facility could be added to better reflect their needs.	The agency has \$150,000 to design a new addition to the sports facility to meet the needs of the community and they are engaged in every project phase to influence the design.	The agency provides the facility, space, marketing, and group exercise training for a community leader to develop and lead their own Zumba class at the sports facility.



# BUILDING TRUST WITH COMMUNITIES

Community engagement is about building relationships, providing ongoing support and making informed decisions with the people you serve. Building trust is key as without trust, community members will be hesitant to work with your agency to reveal their desires for park spaces and will likely not use or respect the space, threatening the long-term success of the project. Vulnerable populations have often been left out of decisions or ignored when it comes to park investments. To overcome these past decisions:

## ACKNOWLEDGE PAST EXPERIENCES

## INVOLVE LOCAL COMMUNITY LEADERS AND PARTNERS

## BE TRANSPARENT AND DELIVER ON PROMISES

### ACKNOWLEDGE PAST EXPERIENCES

Many municipal agencies, including parks and planning, have some history of systematic and/or overt practices that have intentionally or unintentionally forgotten, ignored and underinvested in certain communities (e.g., communities of color, low-income communities, etc.). This history often leads to a mistrust of local government. While many agencies have invested time, energy and resources in changing these systems, communities continue to be over-surveyed, overpromised services and amenities and displaced from their neighborhoods due to a lack of voice, power and representation in the process and decision making.

It is important to understand where hesitancy comes from so that you can address concerns and reassure the community how your process may differ from past experiences. Start by meeting community members where they are. Go to popular community events, their neighborhoods, worship centers, community centers and parks and listen to their concerns, rather than asking them to come to city hall for a public meeting. Reiterate your desire to work together to create solutions and your commitment, as a park and recreation agency, to serving their needs. **By investing time in understanding the community you can begin to heal old wounds and start to build the foundation of trust.**

### Observe and Start Conversations

Take the time to understand community needs through observation and conversation. Sometimes the best way to learn about a community is to see how people interact with public spaces or attend meetings and events without an agenda. Do kids regularly play basketball in the street? Perhaps they need a basketball court. Do families have a lot of neighborhood block parties? They might like a park with more gathering space and grill areas. Are parents voicing road safety concerns at PTA meetings? Maybe the solution is to create more safe walking routes to parks. Once you have observed and listened, engage in conversations with community members to understand more about their frustrations, what their needs are and how you can work together to create solutions. Focus on asking thoughtful questions and listening to them rather than directing the conversation around your priorities to fully understand how your agency can better serve the community.

### USING TECHNOLOGY

Gathering data through technology is also great way to see usage that could support your observational data collection. Remote monitoring systems can be helpful but are also expensive. If your agency does not have the resources to use this technology, the observational data is still necessary to collect.

## LOCAL COMMUNITY LEADERS AND PARTNERS

Community leaders are the gateway into a community. These leaders may work in local schools, run neighborhood businesses and/or lead worship services. They have a stake in the well-being of the community and have built connections and trust. While community members may be reluctant to engage with your agency, they already have a bond with these leaders that can give your efforts credibility.

Get involved with these existing networks and build relationships with them. **Work with these trusted community members to advocate for the project and be the project's representative in the community.**

### Align Goals with Community Needs

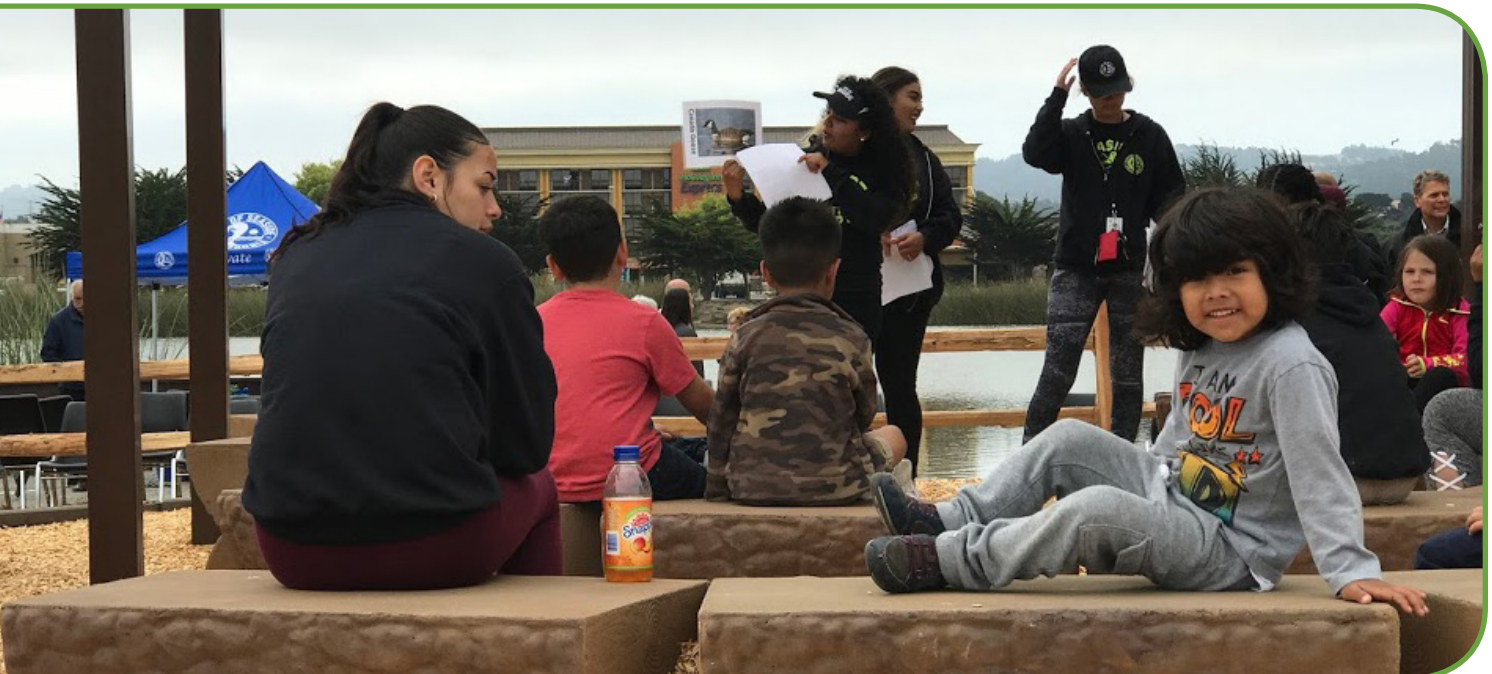
Communities, particularly those that are most vulnerable, may be struggling to meet their basic needs – food, housing, jobs, safety – and may not have the same goals for the project as your agency initially set out to achieve. To build trust, you must acknowledge those most basic needs and align your project goals with those of the community even if it means altering your project plans.

**After you have listened to and considered the community's needs, see if your goals align with what you heard and observed and ensure that it continues to prioritize equity.**

Take a step back and reconsider your project goals and plans. How do they align with the community's needs? Do these goals address their concerns? Stay adaptive and open to feedback from the community. For example, if community members originally hoped for an aquatics center and that is not in the project scope, meet them halfway and consider a smaller water play project like a splash pad. Talk through these questions with the member of your community advisory coalition and be open to their perspectives.

Stakeholders must be representative of the community and may include:

- Religious institutions
- Community development corporations
- Neighborhood groups or Homeowners Associations (HOAs)
- Government community affairs department
- Local businesses
- Community-based nonprofits
- Park friends' groups
- Schools
- Youth



## BE TRANSPARENT AND DELIVER ON PROMISES

Communities, especially vulnerable populations, have historically been overpromised on projects. **Engage community members early in the planning process; even before a project scope has been decided, if possible, and involve them in creating the scope and identifying project funding.** Communicate the project description up front and reiterate it whenever you speak with community members. It's important that they know what your agency can and cannot deliver through the scope of the project. For example, you have funds to create a sports field, but not to construct a new aquatics center. This will eliminate any sky-high aspirations that will result in disappointment.

In addition to being transparent about the scope of the project, it is important to communicate the project timeline and the municipal processes involved. Some projects require an extensive approval process, and, as a result, will take a long time to complete. **Be upfront with the community and engage the community advisory council in other community events to keep the momentum going.** If the project will require approval from city council, consider how community members might be involved in advocating for the space. If this will be a long-term project, consider how they will be engaged throughout each project phase. Are there existing community events your agency can take part in? Can the community take part in the project and help build the frames for the community garden or plant flowers in the park space?

### Celebrate Project Milestones

The most important part of engaging the community is following through on the promises made throughout the process. Celebrate even the smallest project milestones with the community instead of focusing only on the final product and show them how their ideas have been integrated into the project plans. Continue to engage the community members throughout the project by giving them ownership of a specific aspect of the project. This will further show them that this is their space.

Host volunteer events, such as landscaping, painting and building, to help with phases of the project. Supply the community with the tools needed to complete ongoing maintenance of the space to make it their own.

### Stewardship

Once the project is completed, continue to host events and activate the space. Work with the leaders, volunteers and community members you have engaged in the project and delegate tasks for them to continue to be active in the space. Give them ownership over a community garden or organize park clean-up events. The long-term success of engagement and the well-being of the new space depends on continued stewardship by the community.



# CASE STUDY

## MEETING THE COMMUNITY WHERE THEY ARE

### **Building Trust with Communities; Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy**

**Contributing authors: Erin Tobin, Community Engagement Manager, and Susan Rademacher, Parks Curator**

Since its founding in 1996, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy has promoted public involvement in planning, designing, building and caring for parks. Early efforts were focused on master planning and on capital projects in large regional parks. As the organization matured and gained trust, it has been increasingly invited to work in neighborhood-scale parks. The inequities in distribution and quality of these smaller parks became apparent to the Parks Conservancy, which then identified a set of parks for revitalization efforts. The selection of the parks was based on geographic distribution, potential for community impact and historic significance. Among them, McKinley Park emerged as a high-potential for successful revitalization because of the strength of its community leadership, and a Master Plan was completed in 2016.

In 2017, the Parks Conservancy engaged the community in a project to restore and upgrade the “Chicken Hill” section of McKinley Park. The Parks Conservancy hosted a series of community meetings to develop a scope for park improvements and to help shape the design. To meet community members where they were, the project team attended already-scheduled community meetings and hosted more intimate “living room conversations” at community members’ homes to engage people that could not make it to the regularly scheduled meetings.

When community members began expressing reservations about the project within an economic context, the Parks Conservancy had to think creatively about how to meaningfully address their concerns. Deep listening led to the Conservancy team’s better understanding of other perspectives, like the lack of jobs available to the community. Although the process wasn’t easy, the Parks Conservancy continued to affirm its commitment to finding solutions for the community throughout the duration of the project. The Conservancy secured additional funding for workforce development, carved out specific scopes of work for local contractors and worked with the community to identify the right skill sets needed for the project.

In December 2018, the city of Pittsburgh and the Parks Conservancy further demonstrated their mutual dedication to community engagement by embarking on a five-month “Parks Listening Tour.” The purpose of the tour is to share new data about park conditions city-wide and to gather information on what neighbors love about their parks and what investments they would like to see. By the halfway point in February 2019, the Parks Listening Tour had already engaged more than 2,000 Pittsburgh residents at community meetings and events and through an online survey. By the tour’s completion at the end of April 2019, the Parks Conservancy intends to have reached residents in all nine City Council Districts and in 70 of the 90 neighborhoods that form the city. The information gathered will be used to develop an equitable investment strategy to guide future investments made in Pittsburgh’s parks.

To supplement the Parks Conservancy’s two full-time staff people dedicated to community engagement, it has established “Park Champions.” This program lays out a formal training process and is supported by an endowment. As on-the-ground community advocates, Park Champions receive a stipend to engage their neighbors in park projects. They will engage their local communities to raise awareness of the benefits and needs of our park system and will promote the dedication and hard work required to develop and maintain such an excellent resource. In years to come, Park Champions will play a critical role in rallying the awareness and support needed to ensure that all Pittsburghers have access to vibrant parks.

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

As you are building relationships with the community, start to identify the specific engagement methods that will return the level of community involvement you are seeking based on the project, community snapshot, your community engagement goals and previous engagement activities. Think about what engagement approaches will be best given the needs and characteristics of your community. While there are specific methods listed below, remember that every community and project is different, so use these as a starting point and stay adaptive and receptive to community and project needs.

## COMMUNICATION STYLE

Project management language can often be hard to follow if you are not as intimately involved with the project as the project manager or planner. Finding the right communication style is key to understanding community needs and working with the community to build a solution. Use the community snapshot information and attend community events to learn how community members communicate with one another.

**Tailor your method and approach to communicate with the community in a way that they feel comfortable with and are receptive to.**

Create a communication schedule and plan to keep community members engaged throughout the entire life of the project. Make sure your plan addresses how to deal with problems and concerns quickly. Provide regular updates to the community to ensure people know they are being heard and the project is addressing their needs.

Consider and observe languages spoken in the community, local media outlets, community social media groups, community listserves, popular gathering places, etc.





## MIXED METHODS APPROACH

Just as communities are diverse, you should use a variety of methods of engagement as well. A mixed methods approach allows you to experiment to see what works best for the community, reach a diverse population, to ensure all voices are heard and to reduce the risks associated with relying on a single method. The selected methods should be based on the community, as well as the content and purpose of the engagement. For example, inviting community members to a fun public event in the park will necessitate a different approach than inviting them to a small targeted focus group.

Employ a combination of these common communication methods in your outreach:

- Hold focus groups
- Post on social media
- Post information and updates on your website or create an interactive, multilingual, ADA accessible project website
- Knock on doors/visit houses
- Organize and host fun events for the community
- Attend other stakeholder/community events
- Organize and host site visits
- Conduct interviews
- Hold design charrettes
- Send personal invitations through the mail or hand deliver
- Use technology like apps and text messaging

Be adaptive and creative. Sometimes the right approach might be something new and personalized that you create in response to community feedback.

## Addressing Conflict

Natural to any feedback process, tensions may arise and you will need to address pushback. Setting up ground rules for engagement ahead of time will help address possible conflict. If there is tension, address it directly. Remind community members that disagreement and conflict of ideas is normal and useful. Remind everyone that it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but it is not acceptable to challenge them personally. Conflict that is harmful including personal attacks, name calling, or putdowns must be interrupted immediately, whether online or in person, as soon as they occur. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if the group members are bought into the ground rules, they will support you.



# CASE STUDY

## USING A MIXED METHODS APPROACH

### **Gathering Data to Make the Case; Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation**

**Contributing authors: Norma E. Garcia and Clement Lau, County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation. Paul Simon and Jean Armbruster, County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health**

The Los Angeles Countywide Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment was a historic undertaking to address health equity and collaboratively engage all communities within Los Angeles County to gather data and input for decision-making on parks and recreation. The primary goal was to engage the public, cities and unincorporated areas, community-based organizations (CBOs) and other stakeholders to quantify the need for parks and recreational facilities and determine the potential costs. It was the first Assessment to engage the entire Los Angeles County community and a broad-based coalition from an equity-based approach.

The Needs Assessment began November 2015 when the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors directed \$3.5 million to the County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) to bring its 10 million+ residents together to complete the Needs Assessment. A Board-appointed Steering Committee and a Technical Advisory Committee guided the work that was completed in just 14 months.

The massive scale community engagement required in a short time frame called for creative and nimble partnerships and administrative processes. It included a broad-based partnership with many different sectors, regions, agencies and organizations, including First 5, sports teams, and businesses. CBOs were especially valuable partners in engaging park users. DPR worked diligently to create a shared vision and goals with these partners. Their transparency and flexibility in sharing leadership helped the process evolve into a truly collaborative joint effort.

The County gave stipends to the cities and established non-profit partners that implemented the community engagement plans instead of going through lengthy contracting processes. Each entity signed a funding agreement which outlined what meetings would look like and what accommodations would be made, such as providing food, childcare, transportation and translation. School data on languages spoken in the home was analyzed to prioritize languages for translation. DPR provided backbone staffing such as: clerical support (printing materials and developing toolkits with area data and an engagement guidelines); support to accelerate administrative processes; technical assistance for cities and organizations new to this approach; and design and implementation of a social media, radio and newspaper campaign. DPR hired a public engagement expert who trained over 300 facilitators and CBOs countywide. DPR staff also got the word out broadly about the community meetings and facilitator trainings, monitored meeting attendance and allocated resources for additional meetings as needed.

The final Needs Assessment data and input was gathered through a series of community workshops held in 188 study areas between December 2015 and February 2016. Extensive outreach was conducted in advance, so community members were aware of the opportunity to learn about local parks and share their input on park needs. These efforts included a countywide education and awareness campaign, and focused efforts to recruit community members within each study area. Thousands of residents participated in workshops. Trained staff (city, county or community-based organization) facilitated the workshops, using a Facilitator Toolkit provided in print and digital formats, with a \$2,500 stipend to cover expenses. Translation of materials was available in Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Armenian.

The Needs Assessment was finished ahead of schedule and its findings were so compelling that the Board of Supervisors decided to put a parks funding measure, Measure A, on the ballot in November 2016. Due in large part to the extensive community engagement process for the Needs Assessment and the effective dissemination of public information, Measure A was passed with nearly 75 percent of voters supporting it and provides about \$94 million annually.



## BEST PRACTICES

### **Be concise and choose your words carefully**

Eliminate use of technical jargon and acronyms and provide data in a visual form and with small, easy-to-understand numbers.

### **Be upfront and honest about project expectations**

It's important that you explain the project description and address the perceived and real results in a way the community understands so that they can make informed decisions.

### **Don't fear push back**

Remember that the community engagement process is critical to the long-term success of your project, so your goal must be for open and transparent dialogue.

### **Be fun!**

Create materials and activities that are fun, attractive, inspiring and informative to draw people in and keep them engaged.

### **Be consistent**

Continuously refer to your broader message and reiterate your goal to serve the community and their needs.

### **Weave in educational components**

During meetings and outreach events, include educational elements to make people feel comfortable in the space and to break down barriers between groups.

### **Designate a point person**

Designate a person to regularly engage with the community and address any questions/comments in a timely manner.

### **Make it easy**

Provide incentives to participate in meetings, such as child care, food and transportation, including free shuttle or bus service, transit passes, etc.



# EVALUATION

Whether you are just starting your community engagement efforts or have been doing so for years, it's never too late to begin evaluating your process. It is critical that you evaluate engagement activities on an ongoing basis and after completing a project to determine if target populations were engaged and to inform your future engagement approach and methods. Evaluation will provide valuable feedback such as the best times or locations for meetings or specific accommodations that are needed.

Just as involving the community throughout the life of a project can help strengthen the project and ensure you are addressing community needs, involving the community in the planning and administration of project evaluation can ensure that you are asking the right questions and involving the right people. **Create opportunities for community members to be involved in the evaluation of the project by inviting them to evaluation planning meetings and carving out specific tasks for community members, such as data collection at events.** Provide incentives, such as childcare and food, and offer these meetings at times more easily accessible to the community.

Before outlining an evaluation plan, refer to your community engagement plan and goals. Consider the following:

- **Success:** What would success look like one or two years following the start of your community engagement efforts, or beyond? What data would you need to collect to assess your success?
- **Measurement:** Who will be collecting this data and when? What are the measurement methods? How will you store the data? Who will analyze the data and when?
- **Stakeholders:** Which stakeholders should be involved in project evaluation? Which stakeholders would be interested in receiving progress updates about your community engagement efforts?
- **Purpose:** How will you use your evaluation results to build knowledge among your staff, improve your community engagement efforts moving forward?
- **Communication:** How will you communicate your results to the public and other key stakeholders? In what format will you communicate the results?



## DATA COLLECTION

To help collect the necessary data to evaluate your community engagement efforts, create a spreadsheet on which to log the details from each community engagement event. This can be used for everything from formal community events to one-on-one conversations.

Following each engagement event, debrief with the project team to discuss the successes, lessons learned and opportunities for improvement. Organize a tracking system to house all this information.

Based on your goals, evaluate your engagement efforts following the completion of a project or at the end of the year. The specific information you collect will vary based on your goals but consider the following outputs, outcomes and measurement methods.

An example spreadsheet should include the following information:

- Event location and time
- Number of people engaged
- Demographic information about the attendees (age, race/ethnicity, etc.)
- Purpose of the event
- Methods of outreach and advertising for the event
- Any feedback received regarding the location, time, methods of outreach for the event
- Accommodations provided or required in the future

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVALUATION

	WHAT'S BEING MEASURED	DATA POINT	MEASUREMENT METHOD/DATA SOURCE	TIMING
<b>Outputs</b>	# of community engagement events your agency held	# events	Count	Annual or per project
	# of community meetings your agency held	# meetings	Count	Annual or per project
	# of community members directly engaged	# engaged	Count	Annual or per project
	Demographics of meeting/event attendees	# of attendees by age and race/ethnicity as compared to census data for the community	Count and census data	Annual or per project
<b>Short-term Outcomes</b>	Community satisfaction with engagement	% satisfied	Interviews, community surveys	Annual or per project
<b>Long-term Outcomes</b>	Effectiveness of your agency's community engagement	% effective	Interviews, community surveys	Before and after engagement activities
	Community knowledge of your agency, mission and work	% increase	Interviews, community surveys	Before and after engagement activities

## DATA ANALYSIS

This information will help you assess whether your engagement efforts improve from year to year or from project to project. You can now ask yourself questions to assess your success, such as:

- **Demographic Representation:** Do the demographics of meeting attendees reflect the larger community? Are there any groups of people in the community that were missing from the community engagement events? If so, why and what is a strategy to reach the missing groups?
- **Satisfaction:** Was the community satisfied with how it was engaged and with the outcome of the engagement? If not, how can this be improved? Note: You will have to define what “satisfaction” means to ensure respondents understand what they are being asked to measure.
- **Attendance:** Was attendance at events as expected? If not, how can attendance be improved?
- **Effectiveness:** Did the community feel that the chosen engagement strategies were effective? Note: You will have to define what “effectiveness” means to ensure respondents understand what they are being asked to measure.

Evaluating your community engagement efforts will not only allow you to communicate strengths and weaknesses internally, helping you improve future activities, but will also help you add value to your work by providing data to illustrate your outreach.

Create flyers with infographics and pictures from the events and share them with community members, donors, partners and other stakeholders.



# CONCLUSION

Public parks and recreation provide essential community benefits when they are reflective of the community's desires and address their needs. Therefore, it is critical that park and recreation agencies ensure all people are welcomed and engaged in park projects and work collaboratively with community members to utilize their park spaces to create solutions for their community. To do this, agencies must commit to an ongoing equitable and inclusive community engagement plan that focuses on building relationships and trust, improving the community's conditions, creating higher-performing park spaces and equitably distributing investments across their jurisdictions.

This Community Engagement Resource Guide is intended to provide park and recreation agencies with a roadmap highlighting the essential steps to performing meaningful engagement around neighborhood-level and park-system planning projects. However, remember that every community engagement plan will look different from project to project and municipality to municipality, so each must tailor the steps and tips to best fit the unique characteristics and needs of the community. Don't forget to assess internal capacity, set a community-based, goal-oriented plan, build trust with community members, use a variety of engagement methods and always evaluate and communicate progress.

## ABOUT NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing parks, recreation and conservation efforts that enhance quality of life for all people. Through its network of 60,000 recreation and park professionals and advocates, NRPA encourages the promotion of healthy and active lifestyles, conservation initiatives and equitable access to parks and public space.

NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations including those in the federal government, nonprofits and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registrations and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for our members that ultimately enrich the communities they serve.

NRPA places immense importance on research and data to raise the status of parks and recreation and conducts research with two goals. First, NRPA creates data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA generates data and insights that support park and recreation professionals making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the general public. The NRPA research team works closely with internal subject matter experts, respected industry consultants and the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at [www.nrpa.org/Research](http://www.nrpa.org/Research).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National Recreation and Park Association would like to thank the many professionals who contributed, provided feedback, and assisted in the development of this resource guide. We greatly appreciate your time and contribution to this work.

This work was made possible by the generous support of the JPB Foundation.

Graphic Design: Molly Benson

Cover Photo: Coopers Ferry Partnership





**NRPA** National Recreation  
and Park Association

*Because everyone deserves a great park*

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RESOURCE GUIDE

## CREATING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HIGH-PERFORMING PARKS

