

This paper considers the methods, best practices, and lessons learned from community engagement processes related to park and library reinvestment initiatives. Beyond the administrative details of the “process” itself, this paper hopes to address the relationship-building aspects of community engagement—before, during, and after the timeframe of any specific project. The topic of community engagement is also interdependent with that of governance and partnerships, given that many community engagement initiatives are built as partnerships, and the strongest community engagement initiatives partner with a group or organization that has longstanding and deep roots in the community.

Based on the research and interviews, it is clear that the bottom line for community engagement is “local.” This is not a surprise, but it does mean that there are fewer examples of a systemic approach to community engagement. In some cases, system-wide models to conduct community engagement are adopted under the organizational umbrella of governance and partnerships, but the existing literature does not adequately address how to scale up community engagement from a strong local park/library-based scenario to an equally strong system-wide approach. In fact, the opposite seems to be true: real community engagement *cannot* and *should not* be replicated across different geographies, scales, sites, etc. Honest community engagement, whether spearheaded from the ground up in a grassroots structure or led by city agencies/officials, must encourage, respond, and react to conversations at the most local level, and improvise accordingly. Project timeframes cannot be too strict, and outcomes should not be predetermined.

As an exercise in defining terms, this paper will use the phrase “community engagement” rather than “public engagement” or “civic engagement.” There is crossover between all three terms, and no empirical definition separates them. However, for the purposes of this discussion, they can be distinguished as follows: **community engagement** refers to collaborations between public decision-makers, private partners, and local residents to determine a shared vision. (Note the use of “collaboration” rather than any process focused solely on collecting feedback; this is a critical facet of community engagement.) The structure of the leadership or convening role can take many forms. **Public engagement** is a broader term that refers to the inclusive participation of citizens in public life. **Civic engagement** refers to the participation of citizens in decision-making and electoral processes specifically, such as voter registration.

When it comes to civic asset reinvestment projects in particular, the local community can be defined and engaged at varying scales, using various forms of communication, and at different points in the process—there are no universal principles for these variables, and there are good and bad practices for each factor. For example, several cities have organized ballot measures in recent years, soliciting voter approval for bonds, levies, or other financing to fund parks, libraries and recreation centers. The most successful examples of these initiatives involve both community engagement efforts and civic engagement campaigns to build support for the measure and earn approval, then remaining transparent about the use of funds as they are spent. This is true of New Orleans and other cities that have successfully passed bond measures to fund parks and libraries, in many cases with the aid of EveryLibrary, a political action committee that works around the country to mobilize voters to support library referenda. In contrast, the city of Seattle did little community or civic engagement work in 1994 to build support for a major bond issue that would have funded a reinvestment in the municipal library system. Voters did not trust the city to use the funds wisely, and the city did not make a strong enough case on a local enough basis to convince them otherwise; the measure was defeated at the ballot box. This example—which offered many lessons learned to library and city officials and later spurred the success of the Libraries for All

campaign—demonstrates the importance of connecting with community members early and often, in settings and conversations that allow for genuine feedback and listening. This is true for all reinvestment projects, but it is especially true for cities that return to their voters again and again to replenish a funding stream for parks, libraries, and/or recreation centers. Community engagement is not a simple box to be checked in a project management chart or at one’s polling place; rather, it is an intentional and sustained process over time.

Successful community engagement hinges on getting people to show up for meetings, conversations, charrettes, and presentations, and they are most likely to show up when they have been personally invited (and reminded) by someone they trust and already know. This speaks to the importance of longevity in relationship-building and community engagement, reinforcing the importance of public agencies’ work alongside locally-grounded organizations and individuals. These are the people with longstanding roots and relationships in the community, and they are the trusted partners that can invite and engage local stakeholders over the long term, based on their track record of doing just that. For example, the organizers behind the Neighbors Helping Neighbors toolkit in Philadelphia reached out to graduates of the Citizens Planning Institute to invite them to participate, issuing personal invitations in person and by phone based on their pre-existing relationships. This pattern and best practice of partnership is also demonstrated in the case study of MKE Plays, and in the example of the Buchanan Street Mall project, where the city and the Trust for Public Land have collaborated with trusted neighborhood leaders from Citizen Film and Green Streets. These relationships depend on long-term collaboration for both the public agency and the organizational partners, balancing the value in setting expectations against the importance of not walking away and damaging trust mid-way through a project.

Such personal connection and sustained engagement supersedes technological tools for community engagement, despite the fact that apps and websites are often seen as the means to connect with broader (and arguably younger) stakeholders. Software and app developers have created a number of apps and tech tools to encourage participation in public decision-making, presumably in an effort to lower the barrier for participation and bring as broad an audience as possible into the conversation. Examples of these tools include MindMixer, Peak Democracy, Give a Minute Chicago, and others. However, a 2013 study published by the Pew Research Center evaluated online and offline political engagement and found that online civic engagement reflects the same class, wealth, and education inequities as offline participation. In other words, online public participation is most effective among young people who are already civic-minded, and does little to reach and engage new audiences.

Best practices for these collaborations should recognize the investment of time that the local partner is contributing, and should compensate appropriately for that time. This means subsidizing the partner’s staff or volunteer time, offsetting and/or fully underwriting event costs, and making other financial arrangements that appropriately value the partner’s role. The Buchanan Street Mall project offers one example of this, as the advocates and facilitators from Green Streets were compensated for their time throughout the first two phases of the project.

This form of collaboration also speaks to the importance of capacity-building and co-learning as an objective of successful community engagement efforts. Rather than structuring the “engagement” as mere check-in presentations or narrow solicitations of input, true community engagement should be based on mutual discussion and learning in the form of charrettes, meetings, or more informal conversations between public officials, neighborhood residents, and other stakeholders. These

facilitated events and efforts will be built on, and result in, more fruitful relationships and plans for a park or library. The research and case studies indicate that this deeper form of community engagement should also generate greater trust in the management of the project, and greater interest in the use of the civic asset over time, as was the case in the pilot projects of the MKE Plays initiative in Milwaukee.

The case studies represent different types of community engagement events, ranging from informal (and ongoing) conversations to design charrettes to public meetings (with opportunities for genuine dialogue) to collective field trips. The Buchanan Street Mall project represents the first two types of events; the Seattle Libraries for All campaign and MKE Plays initiative employed the public meeting model; and the Neighbors Helping Neighbors toolkit and Garfield Park organizers each convened field trips for co-learning opportunities. Each of these event types required different collaborative partners, and different roles and responsibilities for each partner. Importantly, as participants across these case studies reflected on their experiences, they emphasized that a well-organized event or convening does not mean that the agenda for the collaboration is pre-ordained. In fact, the strongest examples of community engagement work around civic asset reinvestment involved stakeholders and partners in setting, not merely adhering to, that agenda. A partner in the Garfield Park community-mapping work went one step further, underscoring that the timeline cannot be prescribed, either. In other words, “outsiders” (in the form of consultants, or perhaps simply detached public officials) should not drive the timing of the planning process; this will result in a community engagement effort that is out of step with the community it seeks to engage.

In planning these conversations and charrettes, organizers should carefully consider the logistics of any public gathering, taking into account the best timing, location, childcare arrangements, and facilitator for the local community. The gatherings should be reliably and consistently timed, and take place (as much as possible) outside of the typical work hours for neighborhood residents. They should be held in a neutral and accessible neighborhood location, and should make accommodations for childcare wherever possible to enable working parents to participate. Participants in the Buchanan Street Mall project, the Seattle Libraries for All campaign, and others note the value of providing food (however simple it is, it should be consistently offered). Most importantly, a strong and collaborative convener should lead all community engagement gatherings, and there should be some record of any meetings or charrettes to document the discussion and hold leaders accountable. In the case of Buchanan Street Mall, Citizen Film served as documentary filmmakers, creating a dynamic record of the project as it progressed through the first two phases of collaboration.

That type of ongoing reporting-back and listening is critical to the long-term success of community engagement around civic initiatives. It speaks (again) to the issue of trust-building and trust-maintaining, and it holds partners accountable to the goals of the project as they were collectively defined. In the Buchanan Street Mall project, the reporting takes the form of film screenings, which present documentary narratives of the work to date (and the film’s editors continually update the documentary). For Seattle’s Libraries for All campaign, the neighborhood-based presentations and the meetings of the Citizen Implementation Review Panel served as the mechanism for reporting and ongoing conversation. Some critics argue that this engagement did not sufficiently feed back into the actual design process, and is therefore not a strong model of community engagement; nevertheless, it is worth highlighting the fact that the meetings were held in each neighborhood, rather than simply in a central location that would privilege some residents over others. Ultimately, the research review of best practices, and the case studies examined for this paper, demonstrate

that community engagement should be local but not time-limited; it should be genuinely participatory and not prescribed; its conversation and designs and dialogue should be collaborative, not one-dimensional. In short, the work of community engagement should begin long before any particular design is conceived.