

Engaging the Community

With every planning process, the planning team should strive to engage a large, representative swath of the community. In sharing their opinions, community members can resolve many of the planning team's issues and questions. However, public engagement presents another challenge for the planning team - gathering residents for a substantive discussion. To bring people to the table, the planning team should employ a multi-faceted effort that relies on community networks, reaches people where they are, and utilizes technology carefully. Remember- hold public events only when necessary, focusing the conversation around a narrow set of issues.

The most effective tactic for engaging community members is hardly revolutionary: conversations between neighbors. People trust and engage in what they hear while walking their dog or shoveling the driveway. Steering committees are a vehicle for tapping into these community networks and simulating organic neighborly interactions. The steering committee has a dual role; they are the ambassadors from the town to the planning team and the plan's ambassadors to the town. They are responsible for reaching out to townspeople: inviting friends and neighbors to events and updating them on the progress. Their connections to residents and other community organizations are immensely valuable. For example, they can involve their mountain biking or conservation group with the forest planning process. Outreach to other community groups, such as churches, local business councils, or the elderly, can bring a useful and different perspective to the conversation. Also, Front Porch Forum is a popular virtual community network for sharing updates, events, and surveys.

Once the community is aware of the planning process, it is essential to "meet people where they are," by making the process accessible to the entire community. Holding and publicizing meetings at convenient community gathering places (churches, schools, recreation centers, and coffee shops) creates an open and inclusive dynamic. Events at schools and recreation centers are particularly advantageous for families with children – the children are occupied while parents attend the meeting. Younger community members can also engage with the plan through classroom projects or field trips, which often involve their parents as well. For families, holding meetings at varying times, including weekends, helps accommodate busy schedules. Another useful tactic to accommodate full schedules is staging events at existing community events such as Town Meeting Day, festivals, races, and school functions. And with the hardest to reach residents, sending volunteers to make personal contact is an effective strategy. After residents have engaged in the process, sharing the results of the process makes them willing to continue their involvement.

Technology is another platform to “meet people where they are.” Reliance on technology for community engagement is essential but should not replace other approaches. There are many fantastic tools for engaging the public on the internet: mapping, surveys, Facebook, and platforms or websites to share past meetings and solicit feedback. Word of mouth and face to face conversations are as or more effective than Facebook. Particularly in the many rural, age-diverse communities across the state, online engagement should work in concert with other tools to reach the entire population.

A successful public engagement process does not rely on any single method. Instead, it employs a great variety of approaches to publicize and draw participants to events. The set of approaches should be unique to your community and its character. Your best strategy is to encourage community members to talk to their neighbors, post events in community forums and gathering places, and to personally reach out to important groups in the community. And of course, provide refreshments.

Holding Public Meetings

The town forest recreation planning process balances presenting information with listening to the ideas and opinions of the community. Attendees should be given many different means to provide input. In this planning process, at the visioning workshop, attendees can provide input through one-on-one conversations with committee members, stickers, write-in boards, and a comment box.

The steering committee should encourage visionary thinking, especially at the beginning stages of the planning process. In the beginning, everything should be on the table with a sky’s the limit philosophy and a free flow of ideas. As the process moves forward, feasibility and environmental considerations will be taken into account.

In a multi-meeting planning process, the leaders should demonstrate that they took the input heard at previous meetings into account. This might include providing a slide show of pictures and charts to recap the previous meetings, or typing up meeting notes and making them available to the public.

The public engagement should be inclusive. Pre-meeting outreach efforts should target people beyond the “usual suspects,” reaching out to groups beyond typical forest users. The meetings should also accommodate cultural and language needs.

After each meeting, the committee should evaluate how the meeting went. How did the format work? What had the committee been hoping to receive input on but didn’t? Were strong sentiments heard?