

Public Participation Challenges and Opportunities

The City of Pittsburgh identified an opportunity to improve public engagement outcomes across its organization. The key challenge for this effort was to address the public's vastly different engagement experiences for each meeting, project, program, and department. Once all City staff were empowered with clear standards and easy-to-use resources, then effort could be given to innovating and creating robust engagement plans for key projects. This effort was led by the Department of City Planning, and identified the following key City Departments for implementing engagement standards:

1. Department of City Planning
2. Department of Mobility and Infrastructure
3. Department of Public Works
4. Office of Management and Budget
5. Department of Innovation and Performance
6. Department of Permits, Licenses, and Inspections

This work was supported by the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity, Office of Community Health and Safety, and Office of Community Affairs. Each of these Departments and Offices lead their own engagements, mostly led by policy and technical staff (Planners, Engineers, Housing Specialists, Landscape Architects, Policy Advisers, etc.). The City of Pittsburgh lacked structural communications and engagement support, meaning that the work of creating public engagement plans was a challenge that fell almost exclusively on these staff members.

Community members noted a distinct lack of trust in local government and confusion about how to find input opportunities and consistent information about projects as key challenges to engagement to navigating the City's decentralized engagement program.

Rationale for Public Participation

As a city facing massive change, the Department of City Planning found that they were constantly asking big questions about the future of the city and that residents were having a challenging time engaging on these long-term, high-level questions. When discussing opportunities for change, residents and staff would feel anxious about asking the right questions and providing helpful answers. In a moment of self-reflection, it was decided that before they could ask the big questions, they first had to understand how to ask those questions. In this way, the impetus for this entire effort was a desire to find respectful, trust-building, insightful, equitable, and - maybe - fun ways of asking the question "*What should the city look like in 20 years?*"

In 2018 and 2019, the Pittsburgh Public Engagement Guide was developed through a collaborative process with a forty-person working group. This document was adopted by the City Planning Commission, making it a viable basis for the review of all long-range planning and policy projects at all future Planning Commission. Commissioners could now ask about how these projects were meeting their stated engagement goals.

When the pandemic began a few months later, the city was faced with the conundrum of facing just adopted a set of engagement values and goals and suddenly having no tools to implement them. By June 2020, the city launched EngagePGH, meant to be a one-stop-shop for all things public engagement for City residents. Over the course of the last three years, all the above-listed Departments have used EngagePGH. To address the key challenge of residents not

knowing how to participate, EngagePGH sorts all projects by jargon-free keywords and locations. As a potential engager, all I must do is go to engage.pittsburghpa.gov and indicate my categories of interest to see relevant current, future, and past engagement projects.

Today, the city pushes forward with its current challenge of providing additional support to meet a growing push for better engagement. The City is now investing in centralized engagement and communications staff to support those technical and policy staff at a department-level.

Impact of Core Values on the Organization

The City of Pittsburgh's investment in core values for public engagement makes it a strong contender for organization of the year. Adopting principles such as transparent communication, trust-building, equity, relationship-building, and increased participation, the city has demonstrated a commitment to shaping its organizational culture.

A working group of forty Pittsburghers highlighted important words from different engagement values. Staff created flashcards and small groups categorized and built them into value statements (see Image 1). After consolidating ideas and engaging in open discussions, the statements were edited over several months to form operational principles. These are operational principles meant to shape organizational culture.

As an example, the City's transportation engineers were required to regularly host public meetings to discuss roadway improvements, specifically new bike lanes. These meetings seemed to always go badly. Staff did not want to host them, there were no clear outcomes, the public was asked broad questions, participants would leave frustrated, and politicians – in turn – would get frustrated.

Following the adoption of the Pittsburgh Public Engagement Guide, an internal exercise was conducted with transportation staff to determine what was going wrong. It was determined that these meetings were emphasizing maximizing participation without focusing on transparent and open communication with the goal of building trust. The Public Engagement Guide helped empower these staff members to create engagement plans that were honest with the public about their realms of influence and asked meaningful questions. Staff said this improved morale for hosting these meetings as there were now clear metrics of success.

The launch of EngagePGH, a digital platform for all engagements, provided staff with a valuable resource to meet these new standards. Environmental planners, for example, found it to be a versatile tool they could utilize in every meeting, offering unlimited services to residents. The platform enabled community groups to have dedicated engagement pages for sharing ideas, resources, and notes regarding specific greenways. By allowing stakeholders to engage at their convenience, either in real-time or asynchronously, EngagePGH expanded opportunities for involvement and information sharing, particularly for groups with limited capacity.

“EngagePGH is a resource I bring to every engagement, whether its in-person or online. Residents can see their voice reflected in the public record immediately and with no lag time – that has an enormous impact on my ability to build trust with and influence outcomes on behalf of the public.” -- Martina Battistone, Environmental Planner

Evaluation Against Core Values

Below is an example of how the City of Pittsburgh and its public participation practice have furthered each of the IAP2 Core Values.

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.

In the development of the Public Engagement Guide, the Mayor's Office of Equity and the Government Alliance on Race & Equity were consulted to create specific strategies for improving racial equity outcomes in public engagements. The Public Engagement Guide, for this reason, contains the City's first Equity Statement and applies GARE's Equity Lens in evaluating burdens on, benefits to, and outcomes for underserved communities. A key part of incorporating equity into all future engagements was a promise to identify disproportionate adverse effects that the City's work may have on any community, but particularly on low-income populations and communities of color; and recognize the ways communities' needs can influence planning, investment, implementation, and enforcement processes.

The Public Engagement Guide then identifies determinants of success and best practice examples of how to understand the community, apply the equity lens, build partnerships with the community, identify factors that affect participation, and reach the hard-to-reach. By putting equity at the forefront of its engagement goals, the Pittsburgh Public Engagement Guide clearly identifies the right for all Pittsburghers to be involved in these decision-making processes.

When creating EngagePGH, the City of Pittsburgh emphasized that digital engagement was a critical part of meeting its participation goals because it removes many barriers to participating, particularly barriers for underserved communities. For example, no amount of advertising, free parking, and excellent facilitation is going to make a meeting downtown at 5 pm convenient for many Pittsburghers, especially those who rely on public transit. Now, with EngagePGH, that traditional public meeting is complemented by an opportunity to provide input on the same questions from a mobile device at any time convenient to the engaged. EngagePGH isn't about getting everyone participating online – it's about providing a platform through which many stakeholders can engage in a way that actually works for their schedules.

2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.

The Pittsburgh Public Engagement Guide is based on the idea that effective public engagement can improve decisions. In this way, staff training on engagement emphasizes that legitimate processes and credibility are built through transparency and open communication with all stakeholders to build a new foundation based on trust. Staff are now required to create public engagement plans for all engagements. Resources in the Public Engagement Guide help staff determine which level is appropriate to the project.

For example, a district planning process should ask big, open-ended questions about how you might reimagine a stretch of highway instead as a pedestrian boulevard in fifty years; while a bike lane project should focus contribution opportunities on the public's true areas of influence, which might include the style of bike lane or what kinds of bollards will line the separated lane and not whether people like bike lanes as a concept.

This has been an important organizational shift for Pittsburgh because it empowers staff to feel confident hosting "smaller" engagements, being honest about constraints, and identifying clear pathways to influencing final decisions.

3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.

Having the City Planning Commission adopt the Public Engagement Guide with support from the Mayor's Office and input from the City Council was a clear decision to institutionalize engagement best practices. This also helps staff to clearly identify the final decision-makers for a question, as this is often a Commission, City Council, or the Mayor's Office.

One example of this concept in action was for the Oakland Plan, a district plan for the City's university district. A robust in-person, digital and hybrid engagement program was conducted over two years. Historically, the Planning Commission was only presented with staff recommendations at the end of a process. Under the direction of the Oakland Plan's Public Engagement Plan, the Planning Commission was updated by the Planning Director every six months on the plan's engagement goals and progress. Once the plan was finally presented for adoption at the end of those two years, the Planning Commission had a clearer idea of how the public had influenced the plan on which they now had to vote. This is an important part of fulfilling a promise to promote sustainable decisions because it helps the final decision-maker to understand the tradeoffs and compromises debated along the way.

4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.

A major innovation following Pittsburgh's digital engagement efforts is the ability to track demographics of engagers and identify ongoing engagement opportunities for return engagers. EngagePGH offers participants a space to optionally register with the system. When registering, engagers share their categories and locations of interest, as well as some standard demographic information. In designing engagements that emphasize representation and maximizing input opportunities, this empowers staff to identify engagers interested in diverse topics and to see whose voices might be missing from a conversation.

For the Oakland Plan, staff organized public meetings and focus groups to engage under-represented demographics. All input was recorded directly into EngagePGH, treating voices equally regardless of the forum. A focus group led by a university student senator successfully elevated the opinions of numerous students in a neighborhood with over 30,000 students. Unlike previous public meetings with limited student engagement, this focus group provided an opportunity for students to contribute their opinions alongside their neighbors.

5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.

Pittsburgh achieves this Core Value in two ways. First, the Public Engagement Working Group was assembled to create the Public Engagement Guide, as described previously in this submission. An outcome of that process was to require all long-range planning and policy projects to create public engagement plans, encourage their staff to build those plans with project steering committees, and to then post them publicly.

Pittsburgh's Neighborhood Plans now use a framework identified in the Public Engagement Guide to co-write engagement plans with steering committees. In the case of the Oakland Plan, [three full Steering Committee meetings](#) were dedicated to co-writing an engagement plan

6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.

A big shift in culture around public engagement in Pittsburgh since the beginning of this process has been around the role of communication in creating a successful engagement program. Many Pittsburgh staff have now been trained in how to use IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, which highlights “Inform” as the first level of engagement. Staff have increasingly sought organizational support in producing clear communications materials.

One meaningful change provided by EngagePGH is around digital communications tools. First and most simply, EngagePGH has provided a common platform for information. As a resident, you know that information on this site is official. It is a common source of truth. Further, EngagePGH offers staff over thirty tools for displaying information in ADA-accessible, dynamic ways. Instead of uploading a slide deck with renderings, staff now use a slider tool that shows overlaid before and after images or create animated graphics with alternative descriptions and captions that are screen readable.

Not only does this drastically improve accessibility, but it also helps to tell a meaningful story with information. Where staff would have previously uploaded a PDF plan, they now have the resources to build interactive and informative ways of digesting large policy documents.

7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

The Public Engagement Guide requires staff to identify how input affects a final decision. This can be, however, an abstract concept. With EngagePGH, staff now use this tool as a way of memorializing all input collected, and providing a clear line to how this input was then used in the next step of the process. In the Oakland Plan, for example, the project EngagePGH page now provides an interactive overview of the results of the planning process. Readers can then explore the project archive and see all input collected throughout the entire process, and clearly follow how step one became step two. The interactive overview also then links to specific engagement activities where you can view the results of a now-finished engagement and read a staff blurb about how this input affected the final decision.

One such example is for a Steering Committee process to vote on interim zoning. You can read the [interim zoning](#) and view a series of five polls presented to the Committee to adjust that final language. You can see the screen-readable results of a poll for each question. In this example, you can see the clear empowerment of the project’s Steering Committee in making a decision that was then presented to the City Planning Commission.

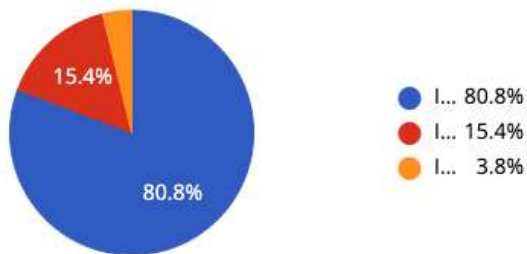
Images



Image 1. Sophia Robison, then-Neighborhood Planner for the City of Pittsburgh, leads a flashcard activity with Public Engagement Working Group members to start to create core value statements for all city-led engagements.

Regarding the content change **bolded above which of these options do you choose?**

This poll has concluded.



Total Votes: 26

Image 2. A [screenshot](#) of an automated quick poll for a Steering Committee vote on interim zoning.