



Strategic Visioning for Community and Economic Development:

KEYS TO ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS



This guide is a companion to another NACo guide, *Strategic Visioning for Community and Economic Development: Keys to Managing Public Dialogue*. Together the guides are intended to provide local and regional leaders with tips and resources regarding effective public engagement and dialogue.

Executive Summary

Community and economic development planning initiatives can impact an area's "sense of place" — the setting in which residents and workers interact with their neighborhood or workplace. For this reason, these initiatives can be emotionally-sensitive topics for residents and potential sources of contention.

As such, community planning is most successful when members of the larger community are aware, engaged and included in the process, rather than informed after a decision has been made. In many counties and regions, elected officials and professional staff, including planners, are engaging diverse community leaders to support an open planning process and develop planning recommendations that reflect the ideas and values of the community.

In 2012, the National Association of Counties (NACo) hosted *The Power of People: Engaging Stakeholders in Your Community's Projects*, an interactive Web-workshop that shared strategies for engaging elected officials and other community leaders in county and regional planning projects. The program showcased innovative and

creative outreach efforts from current grant recipients of the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department's Sustainable Communities Initiative and featured a "clinic" where the panelists and audience critiqued outreach materials submitted by audience members.

The key ideas and best practices highlighted during the webinar include:

- Residents and workers in the community can play various roles through their public participation, including stakeholder, champion and technical advisor.
- Community participation can be recruited in a systematic manner, and a good planning process provides structured pathways for engagement.
- County and regional staff members have unique roles to play in addition to listening to the needs and priorities of stakeholders.
- Creative methods of community participation, such as games, open houses and social media, can make the process fun and attract broader interest.





Roles that Community Members Can Play

Stakeholders are community leaders and volunteers who provide public input for a community planning initiative or the overall planning and implementation process. Stakeholders are committed to an open process, rather than a specific outcome, and can help brand the process as legitimate and fair while building a strong network of support within the community. In their roles, community leaders help drive process outcomes based on stakeholder inputs, rather than pre-determined concepts.

Envision Utah is a statewide planning consortium that has facilitated an unprecedented public dialogue to develop a long-

term quality growth strategy for Utah. As a neutral facilitator, Envision Utah brought together residents, elected officials, developers, conservationists, business leaders and interested parties. Between 1997 and 1999, Envision Utah held over 200 workshops and engaged over 20,000 residents in sharing their “dreams” for their region.

The Envision Utah organizers defined stakeholders as anyone with a particular interest or stake in a project or decision. Accordingly, stakeholders will vary from project to project. For example, stakeholders engaged in reviewing a downtown affordable housing development will differ

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (Iowa)

The Tomorrow Plan, organized by the Des Moines Area MPO, is supported by HUD’s Sustainable Communities grant program and seeks to provide a forum for local stakeholders to participate collaboratively in the regional planning process. Through *The Tomorrow Plan*, Greater Des Moines will create a 2050 planning document, which will help the community address expected future growth within the region.

The Tomorrow Plan’s leadership includes a team of young professionals who help guide the planning process and plan “YP”-specific networking and discussion events. Bethany Wilcoxon, who presented *The Tomorrow Plan’s* story during the NACo webinar, noted: “The young professional demographic is enthusiastic and wants to be more involved.”

Numerous open houses and small group conversations have been organized in conjunction with the plan.

The Tomorrow Plan also utilizes its online presence to share ideas related to the planning topics and community priorities. Des Moines uses the Mind Mixer tool (www.mindmixer.com) to capture good ideas that are suggested by the community. Stakeholders can log on to share their thoughts, provide feedback on ideas submitted by others and vote on the proposals.

The “Design My DSM” online game teaches stakeholders about how planning projects affect community priorities and makes planning fun. Players can designate different coins to various planning projects and view the impacts of their decisions. To date, over 1,000 stakeholders have played the game.

The Tomorrow Plan organizes regular updates on Facebook, Twitter and a blog to advertise planning events, discuss local happenings, and share new ideas from other communities. Use of social media enabled *The Tomorrow Plan* to reach a larger stakeholder audience and extend the discussion beyond public meetings.

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from those assembled to review plans for a new bike path or urban gardening site selection.

When recruiting for project *spokespeople*, county and regional planning, and economic development staff should consider tapping both activists who are most passionate about the community and the demographics affected by the project. Elisa Ortiz, Deputy Legislative Director of Smart Growth America, recommends tapping diverse opinions in the community, even when it means bringing opposing groups to the table. Community meetings can provide a forum for residents to discuss disputed projects and hopefully reach a compromise.

Stakeholders who are engaged at a higher level are sometimes called **champions**. Champions are stakeholders who actively recruit new stakeholders to the process. According to Ortiz, champions also serve as the public face for the media and should be able to speak about the planning initiative in a clear and concise fashion.

Community members may also serve as **technical or core advisors**. Some planners find it useful to gather a team of leaders to serve as a sounding board to ensure that materials are technically strong, locally relevant and based on the most reliable data available. In some communities, core advisors are designated as committee chairs and oversee a particular aspect of the community visioning process.

Recruiting Participation

Questions that can help guide stakeholder recruitment include:

- Who will be affected by the plan outcomes?
- Who are the representatives of those likely affected? Who are “voiceless?”
- Which groups would be responsible for the plan implementation?
- Which groups may be actively opposed?
- Who can contribute resources or funding?
- Who would have to change their behavior or practices if this decision were made?
- Who is critical for plan implementation?
- Who is a local issue–expert who can share expertise?
- Who is missing from the conversation?

Smart Growth America’s Ortiz recommends the following steps for engaging the community in a project:

- Prior to the official start of the process, share information about the anticipated approach with other local officials and ask for their ideas and guidance.
- Seek out good faith commitments to participate in the planning process from interested individuals and organizations.
- Organize a steering committee to guide the process. Consider public officials from other local jurisdictions, development professionals, community leaders and others.
- Host a series of workshops or community forums to engage a larger audience of community members.

Smart Growth America created a worksheet that can help local and regional leaders assess their community participation. To view the worksheet, visit www.naco.org/talkingsustainability.

EXAMPLES OF STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

Government/ Public Sector

- County commissioners
- Mayor and councilmembers
- Congressional liaisons
- Relevant city and county staff
- Regional development organizations (RDOs)
- Federal departments and liaisons (FHWA, EPA, DOT, HUD, etc.)
- State agencies
- Schools
- Hospitals
- Utilities

Mobility Groups

- Local transportation engineers (City or County)
- Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs)
- Public transportation advocates
- Bike/pedestrian advocates
- Disability rights organizations

Economic Development/ Finance

- Economic Development Authority staff
- Landowners
- Business owners
- Chamber of Commerce
- Cooperative Extension
- Farm Bureau
- “Buy Local First” groups
- Tourism board

EXAMPLES OF STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

Local Food/ Farming Groups

- Local farmers and landowners
- Grocery store owners
- Regional food distributors
- Urban gardeners
- Nutrition advocates
- Teachers (especially those involved in a school garden or Farm-to-School initiative)

Housing and Business Groups

- Housing coalitions
- Local developers
- Fair housing advocates
- Homeowners' or renters' associations
- Landlords
- Residents of public housing

Demographic Groups

- Racial or ethnic groups
- Socio-economic groups
- Residents of a particular neighborhood
- Youth groups
- Senior citizen groups

Other Community Groups

- Artists
- Local foundations
- Public and private schools
- Colleges and universities

Role of County and Regional Staff

Elisa Ortiz explained to NACo's webinar audience that it is not uncommon for county and regional staff to serve as the spokespeople for planning projects — speaking about the process at events, recruiting new participation and developing meeting agendas. However,

to have the process truly driven by community members, staff should take a step back and listen to the needs and priorities of stakeholders. Staff roles include: organizers, facilitators and technical advisors.

Creative Community Engagement

County and regional planners are utilizing creative approaches to garner input from stakeholders in both live and online venues. Rather than town-hall style meetings, planners are organizing fun open houses, where games are used as a means to capture input. Large open houses are often complemented with smaller working groups, where stakeholders can take an active role in developing specific strategies related to a given topic, such as the built environment, water quality or transportation.

Communication through social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogs) can help organizers continue a dialogue after live events and engage a younger demographic that may not traditionally attend public meetings. Planning staff, as well as engaged stakeholders, can share outcomes of live event discussions, report on community happenings and post new ideas from other communities.

The highlighted "County Spotlights" in this publication detail how webinar panelists have successfully engaged their communities.

For More Information

Presentations from the 2012 NACo webinar, "The Power of People: Engaging Stakeholders in Your Community's Planning Projects," can be found at www.naco.org/talkingsustainability. Copies of the webinar recording are available upon request.



Virginia's New River Valley Planning District Commission utilized a public engagement tool they called BUILT NRV.

Photo courtesy of New River Valley Planning District Commission

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

New River Valley Planning District Commission (Va.)

The New River Valley represents a mostly rural region in Southwest Virginia, consisting of Floyd, Giles, Montgomery and Pulaski counties, and the City of Radford.

In 2011, the New River Valley received a HUD Sustainable Communities grant to undertake the New River Valley Livability Initiative. The three-year planning process is an opportunity for residents to discuss the factors that impact their quality of life and the region's future. Stakeholder Working Groups develop strategies related to nine issue areas: housing, transportation, energy, agriculture and food, natural resources, Internet access, economic development, water resources, and cultural heritage. Draft documents and communication with working group members are online and accessible by the public.

In addition to working group participation, the Planning District Commission gathers input from stakeholders through online and paper surveys, as well as visits to meet-

ings of other established community groups, such as church meetings and Rotary Club.

The New River Valley has worked with Virginia Tech's Department of Theater and Cinema and its Master's of Directing and Public Dialogue program to integrate storytelling into community meetings. Through these efforts, the Planning District Commission was able to gather much more robust feedback and perspectives on a range of topics, such as race, housing insecurity, isolation of older adults in rural places and substance abuse. Carol Davis, Community Outreach Coordinator, said that this approach was a way to root community decision-making in something very familiar to everyone.

The New River Valley Livability Initiative also solicited stakeholder input by using an interactive game — BUILT NRV — at community meetings. The BUILT game leads stakeholders through a series of hands-on exercises to identify their personal priorities and preferences and work with others to create the best community possible. Participants find ways to address thorny community problems by working through trade-offs and compromises.

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About NACo

The National Association of Counties (NACo) assists America's counties in pursuing excellence in public service by advancing sound public policies, promoting peer learning and accountability, fostering intergovernmental and public-private collaboration, and providing value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. Founded in 1935, NACo provides the elected and appointed leaders from the nation's 3,069 counties with the knowledge, skills and tools necessary to advance fiscally responsible, quality-driven and results-oriented policies and services to build healthy, vibrant, safe and fiscally resilient counties. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org.



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