

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT 12 Best Practices of Community Engagement



Communities are defined by the people who live and work within the buildings and occupy the streets, each defining the unique fabric of the neighborhood. One of the founding philosophies at Rebuild by Design is that the community members are the experts who should have agency over the development of their communities. Embedding that philosophy in each of our projects ensures the development of sustainable relationships between community members, design teams and government.

Since the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced the funding of seven projects in the Hurricane Sandy region in June 2014, state and city governments have studied, tested and refined each project in preparation for implementation. In that time, governments with the help of designers, engineers, architects, planners, specialists and other experts have used various techniques to engage the community and successfully prepare the Sandy region for a changing climate.

Rebuild by Design continues to follow the progress of the funded projects and has observed many creative and innovative community engagement strategies. The success of the seven funded projects depends largely on the degree, quality and continuation of community collaboration.

This document captures and synthesizes Rebuild by Design's observations of community engagement, highlighting the best practices among the seven projects as they are implemented. As project teams continue to engage their communities, these best practices can inspire project teams to effectively engage communities and develop innovative projects with sustainable results.

1

DEMONSTRATE THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Sustainable engagement occurs when communities see that their input has an important role in the planning and design process. Demonstrating that community were heard at prior meetings, and showing how their ideas and concerns have made an impact in the design process creates a “positive feedback loop” that fosters further involvement and continued public support.

EXAMPLE: In meetings for the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project, a portion of the BIG U proposal for lower Manhattan, the Project Team begins each meeting with a recap of community feedback from the prior meeting. Reviewing prior input and integrating public comments into current discussions shows attendees the value of their thoughts in shaping project development.

SHARING INPUT SHOULD BE EASY AND INTUITIVE

Publicly funded sustainability projects mandate periods of public comment during which draft documents are shared with community members in order to provide formal feedback. Rebuild by Design’s project teams expand what is otherwise a rigid and bureaucratic process by creating alternative feedback sources, allowing for more input from the community.

EXAMPLE: The Hudson River Project distributes addressed, ready-to-mail comment cards designed to allow residents to take the cards home, think about the questions, discuss issues with their neighbors and return the completed cards by mail. Additionally, residents can take home extra comment cards for their family and neighbors who were unable to attend meetings.

2

PROVIDE A PHYSICAL PLANNING SPACE

Utilizing a storefront or other accessible space provides a “home” where project team members and government agencies can work together in a publicly accessible space. Such spaces enable informal communication between project team members and the community, allowing for productive yet low-stakes interactions.

EXAMPLE: The Bridgeport Project transformed a formerly vacant storefront in the city’s centrally located downtown district into a highly visible and accessible planning space. Embedding the planning location within the community allowed the project team, local organizations and other stakeholders to walk in and stop by. The team has conducted several design workshops in the space, each helping to foster a co-productive relationship between experts and the community that would have otherwise been unattainable in more formal settings.

3

VISUALIZING THE DESIGN AIDS UNDERSTANDING

Maps, models, and other hands-on visual aids help community participants understand what the project will look like when implemented. Visualizing the size, shape and locations of potential structures can help residents understand the tradeoffs unique to each design.

EXAMPLE: The Living Breakwaters team worked with the virtual reality company, Iris, to create a 3D rendering of a living breakwater. Community residents were able to put on a headset linked to concept designs and virtually dive off the Tottenville shoreline to explore the proposed offshore breakwaters.

4

5

USE VIDEO TO ILLUSTRATE TECHNICAL PROCESSES

Advancing a project from concept to implementation requires a significant amount of research, surveys and studies that show environmental effects over a sustained period of time. For example, the likely performance of flood-mitigation barriers under various storm-surge conditions utilizes extensive computer modeling that often fail to be fully explained through static pictures and written explanations alone. Video can serve as a valuable tool for communicating complex technical field work to the public by providing context, scale and timeframe.

EXAMPLE: The Staten Island project team uses video as a tool to help residents understand fieldwork and data collection. Presentations have included time-lapse videos of sea levels, surveys of the local ecology and a study of the ocean floor. The videos have allowed the project team to explain complex technical fieldwork and the ecology of the shoreline to community members, helping to optimize project participation from residents.

KEEP THE BIG PICTURE IN MIND

Understanding how a community's project area is interconnected with its surrounding communities encourages a comprehensive view of resilience. Through a broad, regional approach individual community projects can be connected to similar projects in nearby communities, laying the groundwork for synergistic, mutually supportive project implementation by sharing information and fostering connections across neighborhood networks.

EXAMPLES:

a) Stakeholders in the Hunts Point Project area in New York City created the South Bronx Resilience Agenda to promote resilience throughout five Bronx neighborhoods: Hunts Point, Longwood, Mount Haven, Port Morris and Soundview. With a focus on regional resilience, the South Bronx Community Resilience Agenda (SBCRA) meets quarterly to share stakeholders' lessons and strategies for a more resilient South Bronx. Recently, the SBCRA has used the neighborhood-focused energy pilot component of the Hunts Point Lifelines project to initiate a discussion of the energy needs of the entire South Bronx. Using the information from Rebuild By Design's experts as a mutual starting point, the SCBRA is better adept to address energy equity and accountability as the state and city advance the energy pilot.

b) The New York Governor's Office of Storm Recovery (GOSR) is leading distinct, yet complementary projects on the Tottenville beachfront in Staten Island. The Living Breakwaters project proposes a "necklace" of offshore breakwaters that will reduce risk, revive ecologies and connect residents and educators to Staten Island's southeast shoreline. Separately, the Tottenville Shoreline Protection Project proposes a hardened dune system consisting of stone core dunes capped with sand to protect vital infrastructure. Both project teams are combining their efforts to better protect the same community by creating layered resilience structures: one in the water and one on the beach. GOSR hosts combined meetings in order to engage the community for both projects simultaneously and develop a common understanding among residents facilitating involvement by Tottenville residents in a focused, layered approach to the coastal resilience of their community.





SHARE MEETINGS ONLINE

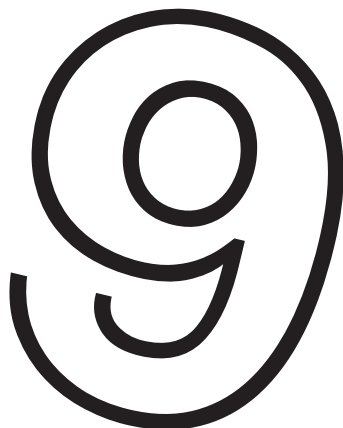
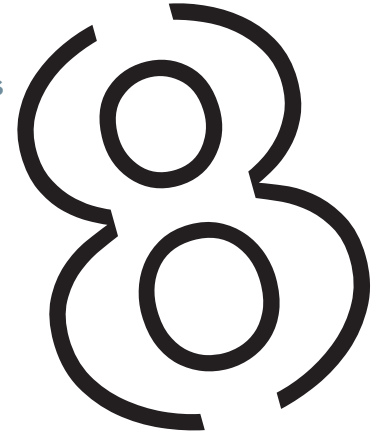
Attending meetings can be a scheduling challenge for many residents. Using the internet to share what has been presented at meetings allows residents to stay informed when attendance proves prohibitive. Sharing meeting discussions and presentations helps to establish a transparent resource for residents and project leaders to continue discussions on the same page.

EXAMPLE: The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection uploads videos of past presentations for both the New Meadowlands and Hudson River Project meetings to their YouTube channel. The channel has been a valuable resource to share the visualizations and digital design models with community members who would have otherwise missed the meeting materials.

AVOID INACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE

For most residents, “design jargon” and bureaucratic language are difficult to understand without years of experience. Translating jargon into layperson’s terms helps the public to decipher government acronyms and technical terms and better understand the roles of each participant as well as project goals.

EXAMPLE: Prior to the public hearing on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Hudson River Project, the City of Hoboken summarized the technical language of the 1 ¼-inch thick document in easy-to-understand synopsis. Simplifying the language in the document enabled CAG members to understand complex terminology and references and easily select a portion of the document relevant to their expertise to study prior to the hearing.



UTILIZE MULTIPLE OUTREACH TECHNIQUES

Community planning meetings are more successful when they harness the expertise and experiences of a diverse array of participants. To promote meeting attendance, Project Teams can utilize a variety of outreach techniques including going door-to-door and providing fliers and other informative materials before meetings. Widespread awareness encourages consistent participation and brings valuable new input to project discussions.

EXAMPLE: Two members of the Staten Island CAC (Community Advisory Committee) go door-to-door before their meetings. They discuss the progress of the projects with neighbors, answering questions and encouraging community members to offer their input during planning meetings.

UTILIZE EXISTING SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Local community organizations can play an important role in facilitating outreach by extending their local networks and providing an additional credibility to Project Teams. Hiring community organizations to do the outreach also extends the reach of project funds.

EXAMPLE: New York City government representatives asked for the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project Team to include local organizations that have outreach capacity. The prime contractor, through a request for proposals, subcontracted with several residential and community engagement organizations including the Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES) and University Settlement.





THE COMMUNITY IS A CLASSROOM

Utilizing the project site itself as an outdoor classroom helps residents to understand the project’s impacts and implications. Holding events within the community also allows for larger audiences, promoting social resilience between neighbors by strengthening local networks through personal connections.

EXAMPLE: The Hunts Point Resiliency Team launched their series of Connection Stories. The intention of this story series is to spotlight different voices and stories in Hunts Point. Throughout the series, members of the Hunts Point community will be paired with different City representatives to explore different aspects of resiliency in the peninsula, such as ecological, social and physical resilience.

RESPOND TO COMMUNITY CONCERNS

Centering presentations, materials and programming on community concerns and clearly communicating design options fosters a relationship of trust and understanding with the community. This trust allows for the project teams to explain the trade offs between different design options.

EXAMPLE: In Hunts Point, the advisory working group developed 14 “implementation principles” that they want the City to incorporate in the planning, implementation and ongoing operation of the pilot project. The community coalition continues to articulate these principles at each community meeting as an ongoing reminder of the importance of adhering to community values.



You can stay up to date and discover new innovative engagement practices in the Sandy region by visiting our website at <http://bit.ly/2r6GG5N>.