

Current State Review of Engagement Practices Report

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Current Bureau Engagement Resources Provided in Focus Groups:

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[Draft Community Engagement and Partnerships Strategy](#) -Water

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Introduction

This report is a product of the Citywide Practices: Engagement Officer Project in the Office of the City Administrator. It provides insights into the current state of community engagement across five key City bureaus: Environmental Services, Housing, Parks & Recreation, Planning & Sustainability, and Water Bureaus. This report builds on earlier feedback from stakeholders about the roles, authority, and reporting structure of the new Engagement Officer. The [project's recommendations](#) which were presented to the City Leadership Team in August 2024, summarize this feedback. The recommendations were based on a preliminary analysis of survey responses, the raw data which is found here: [Employee survey results](#) and [Community survey results](#).

This Fall, the City's Transition Team, in collaboration with the Office of Community & Civic Life ("Civic Life"), facilitated one-hour focus groups that explored the most up-to-date community engagement practices, methods, data collection and sharing tools, as well as communities reached. The goal of discussing current practices is to provide valuable insights on the culture of engagement at the City for the new Engagement Officer role in the new form of government.

Seven focus groups were conducted with 54 City practitioners who's core function involves community outreach and engagement for their bureau and program. Participants were identified by the team leads from the bureaus of Environmental Services, Housing, Parks & Recreation, Planning & Sustainability, and Water. This is a close representative sample of City engagement practices considering the limited time and capacity for engaging with all bureaus while in this critical phase of transitioning into the new form of government.

Findings are presented in a way that helps make sense of a complex system and function by highlighting the commonalities and differences in approaches among teams. Thus, bureaus and teams conduct their own community engagement for their unique goals and services, while at the same time, the analysis shows what practices are recurring across the five bureaus with multiple teams. Finally, key takeaways help point to the existing potential for shaping the future state of citywide community engagement.

The following sections synthesize results from seven focus groups with bureau teams focused on the two areas of **community engagement practices** and **data collection & tools**. The analysis shows commonalities and differences in practices

and methodologies of engagement strategies and data collection & tools currently operationalized at the City.

Community Engagement Practices

Common Strategies Across Focus Groups

Dedicated Engagement Teams:

- Multiple groups highlighted the effectiveness of having dedicated community engagement teams. These teams, often consisting of 5 to 8 members, are pivotal in maintaining long-term relationships, providing consistent outreach, and supporting project outcomes.

Equity and Inclusion:

- There is a strong focus on equitable practices, including the use of equity toolkits and scores, providing language and disability access, and offering compensation, as much as possible for community participation. These practices ensure culturally diverse and systemically excluded communities are included in the engagement process.
- Most groups expressed a strong interest in reaching less connected communities and providing more meaningful opportunities for them to influence project designs and the strategic direction of their bureau. As well, there are relatively few opportunities for community influence and especially once projects reach the capital program stage.

Transparent Communications:

- All groups emphasized the importance of transparent and consistent communication with the communities they serve. Whether through public information sessions, newsletters, or direct engagement, clear and data-supported communications are embedded in practices to build trust.
- Equitable communication practices are integral to most engagement strategies in efforts to reach non-English speakers supported by bureaus' equity and engagement guidance.

Contracts for Community Engagement:

- Contracts with the Community Engagement Liaison Services (CELS) is a commonly used method. CELS are one of the primary ways to organize engagement activities ensuring culturally specific outreach to customers, underserved, and systemically excluded communities. This service also includes language transcreation.

Advisory Bodies and Community Grant Program Partnerships

- Most groups highlighted community advisory committees and grant programs as methodologies that provide opportunities to build relationships. In general, advisory bodies are not viewed as effective in terms of community influence over outcomes and that some are in the process of bureau evaluation.

Different Approaches Among Focus Groups

Leadership and support for implementing engagement strategies differ from bureau to bureau. Community outreach and engagement practices are mostly specific to program, government mandates, or project outcomes. Within a bureau you can find some teams having limited community engagement in reaching project outcomes, while other teams are more focused on building connections with priority communities most impacted by bureau decisions.

Investment and Resource Allocation:

- Some bureau teams, particularly those involved in large-scale capital planning projects, have significant investments in their engagement teams and processes. This includes dedicated staff, adequate funding for community participation, and long-term relationship-building strategies.
- Other bureaus are lacking effective internal mechanisms for staff to access needed engagement resources.
- Participants from two focus groups, Planning and Sustainability and Parks and Recreation, highlighted having a team with a central role to support bureau practitioners with community engagement planning. Water has two bureau-wide support roles for teams conducting community outreach & education with a focus on accessibility tools.

Methodologies for Engagement:

- Methods vary widely, from educational training and one-on-one meetings to large community events and digital engagement tools. Some groups prioritize face-to-face interactions and localized meetings, while others leverage technology for broader outreach.
- According to one focus group, youth engagement and project stewardship programs are highlighted as effective methodologies. However, these approaches were not identified as being applied in other bureaus or teams.
- Within a bureau, engagement practices include basic transactional more timely interactions, particularly focused on customer support and education, such as with Water utility. While alongside this function other practitioners are focused on partnership building, culturally specific outreach, and policy on how staff can participate in community events.

Scope and Focus of Engagement:

- The scope of engagement efforts can differ significantly depending on the program or service. Some teams focus on early planning and continuous engagement throughout project lifecycles, while others engage primarily when community feedback is needed for specific strategic decisions.
- Engagement practices range from transactional types with immediate community interactions to more sustained and strategic partnership-building with external organizations. Some practitioners are interested in efforts to model community co-governance and in clarifying engagement versus outreach in practice.

Data Collection & Tools

Common Strategies Across Focus Groups

Primary Types of Data:

- All focus groups collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data often includes demographic information, outcomes from grants, community feedback through various channels, and engagement project information. Quantitative data involves metrics such as the number of people attending events or signing up for project updates.

Most Common Methods:

- **Application Forms:** Widely used in gather participant information and feedback.
- **Surveys:** Commonly employed methods for collecting detailed data from community members and business communities.
- **Email Lists for Feedback:** Regularly used to reach out to community members and gather their input.

Technologies, Tools, and Public Access:

- **Annual Reports:** Most participating bureaus produce annual reports that summarize engagement efforts, key metrics, and outcomes.
- **Partnership Databases:** Used to track and manage relationships with community partners.
- **GovDelivery Newsletters:** Employed to distribute information and updates to community members.
- **Teams Platform and Project Tracking Sheets:** Utilized for internal communication and tracking project progress with an engagement consultation form.
- **Website:** Various online tools are used for engagement tracking and, on some level, public access to data, including calendar of events.

[Different Approaches Among Focus Groups](#)

Use of Advanced Technologies:

- A group is exploring advanced tools like Salesforce for tracking engagement activities, while most others rely on more traditional or basic systems, such as Excel spreadsheets and SharePoint.
- Online project mapping pages and communication tools vary in use, with one bureau utilizing these more extensively such as with Planning and Sustainability.

Standardized Social Vulnerability Index (SVI):

- The use of the SVI as a tool for understanding and addressing community vulnerabilities is mentioned by some focus groups but is not universally applied.

Public Access and Transparency:

- Levels of public access to collected data differ. Some groups prioritize transparency and make their data publicly available through websites and newsletters, while one bureau protects demographic data based on privacy concerns of vulnerable communities.

Specific Data Collection Practices:

- Certain groups focus on specific data collection methods, such as engagement tracking template, planning consultation forms, recording community meetings, using response cards at events, and developing co-designed reports with community partners.

Takeaways

By identifying community engagement strengths in each focus group, the Engagement Officer has some context to begin a process to advance an overall community engagement strategy. As well, building on current data collection and tools will help to ensure more cohesive, responsive, and equitable outcomes for all Portlanders. The below takeaways help to bolster current community engagement strategies identified through the focus groups. Also, these takeaways are aligned with most recommendations from Civic Life's strategic planning efforts over recent years.

Community Engagement Practices

1. **Build and Maintain Dedicated Engagement Teams:** Investing in dedicated community engagement teams with adequate resources and support from leadership is critical for effective and sustained engagement.
2. **Ensure Transparency and Consistent Communication:** Transparent, quality communication is a foundational practice in all community engagement efforts to build and maintain trust.
3. **Focus on Equity and Inclusion:** Using equity toolkits, offering language and disability access, and providing compensation and support for community participation are essential for inclusive engagement.
4. **Leverage Diverse Methodologies:** Implement engagement methods that are appropriate for the program or project scope and community needs, including both traditional and innovative approaches to improve reach and impact.

5. **Establish Feedback Mechanisms:** Continuous feedback loops and follow-up actions are necessary to ensure that community voices are heard, and their input genuinely influence outcomes.

Data Collection & Tools

1. **Unified Data Collection Framework:** Developing a unified framework for data collection across different bureaus can help standardize practices and improve data quality and comparability.
2. **Adoption of Advanced Technologies:** Encouraging the adoption of advanced data management tools like Salesforce, CRM software, or public engagement platforms can enhance tracking and analysis capabilities. Integrating these tools with existing systems, such as 311, can further streamline data collection and engagement tracking processes.
3. **Utilizing Standardized Indices:** Promoting the use of standardized indices like the SVI and Equity Toolkit/Score can provide a more comprehensive understanding of community needs and disparities, informing better engagement strategies.
4. **Enhancing Public Access:** Striving for greater transparency by making data publicly accessible, where appropriate, can build trust and accountability with the community. Developing clear guidelines on data privacy and public access can balance transparency with confidentiality.
5. **Focused Data Collection Practices:** Promoting specific program or project data collection methods, such as SurveyMonkey, recording of community meetings, and response cards at events can provide needed insights when tracking engagement.

Appendix A: Focus Group Participants and Process

About Bureau Focus Groups

In October 2024, seven focus groups were conducted by the City's Transition Team with support by Civic Life. Before then, individual meetings were scheduled with eleven bureau community engagement leads identified by Civic Life. The individual meetings introduced the Engagement Officer project goals, identified bureau outreach and engagement teams, and confirmed interest in participating in a focus group. Lead practitioners from Transportation, Community Safety, Emergency Management, and Prosper Portland were consulted, however they did not schedule a time for a focus group session with their teams.

Focus Group Participants by Bureau

Bureau teams represented the disciplines of Public Involvement, Outreach and Community Partnerships, Equity and Engagement, Technology and Innovation, Portland Clean Energy Fund (PCEF), Digital Equity, Garbage and Recycling, Waste Prevention Education and Outreach, Collaboration & Friends Engagement Team, Lands Stewardship, Communications, Trails, Community Gardens, Partnerships, Indigenous Communities, and Assets & Development.

Environmental Services: 8 participants

Housing: 9 participants

Parks & Recreation: 12 participants

Planning & Sustainability: 13 participants

Water: 12 participants