

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Plan for Town Council



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For the Town Services and Outreach Committee

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I. PURPOSE

"..if you come together with a mission, and its grounded with love and a sense of community, you can make the impossible possible.

John Lewis, Chicago Tribune

The purpose of the community engagement plan for developing new bylaws and policies is to provide a checklist to Town Council and its committees to effectively engage with all the stakeholders impacted by its decisions in a timely and cost-effective manner from the beginning till the end of the process, with minimum work added to town staff.

PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

An effective community engagement plan can help address, what can sometimes feel like competing needs of the people living, studying, and working in Amherst by systematically informing, listening, observing, and gathering information from the concerned constituents before a bylaw/policy is drafted and finalized (hereafter referred to as the process).

More specifically, the purpose of a community engagement plan can be one or more of the following:

1. **Increase Awareness:** We strive to raise awareness among stakeholders who are impacted by the issues under discussion as early in the process as possible.
2. **Gather Input:** We actively seek input from all stakeholders affected by proposals, including their vision, values, challenges, lived experiences, and recommendations in the early stages of the process.
3. **Understand Values and Needs:** We aim to understand the values, needs, and recommendations of all residents and workers in Amherst prior to drafting the bylaw/policy.
4. **Seek Expert Feedback:** We value the insights of relevant staff members, committees, and other experts to inform our decision-making process.

5. **Promote Diverse Perspectives:** Our goal is to enable town councilors to make decisions based on diverse perspectives and thorough research, with the ultimate aim of improving the quality of life for all residents, businesses, and the environment.
6. **Mitigate Delays and Conflicts:** By fostering open and transparent communication from the beginning of any process, we seek to reduce long-term costs caused by delays and conflicts that arise when constituents are not aligned.
7. **Inform Public about Implications:** We are committed to explaining, informing, and educating the public about the financial consequences, legal aspects, social implications, equity considerations, environmental impact, and other implications of proposals.
8. **Build Trusting Relationships:** Through timely and transparent communication—listening, informing, and dialog—we aim to build trusting relationships that promote creative problem solving that improves the conditions for all involved.

A HUMAN CENTERED APPROACH

This engagement plan is based on a human-centered approach that puts the people living, learning, and working in Amherst at the heart of decision-making processes. The three guiding principles of this plan are empathy, co-creation, and iteration.

Empathy

The starting point of a human-centered approach is empathy, which means listening to all stakeholders and understanding their needs. The key is curiosity and seeking to understand people’s lived experiences.

Co-Creation

Involving community members, staff, and committees with diverse points of view in the creation of new bylaws and policies is the best way to create good policies that promote wellbeing of all involved.

Iteration

This approach uses an iterative process that seeks continuous feedback to develop and refine the policies based on community input.

OBSTACLES AND SUGGESTIONS

1. **Accessing Diverse Perspectives:** Communities are made up of individuals with different needs, values, and perspectives. It can be challenging to reach everyone and reflect the needs of our diverse community.

Involving diverse groups, key stakeholders, university and colleges, faith organizations, non-profits, and town departments will help build engagement. Also, important to build community via different cultural events on an ongoing basis.

2. **Balancing Diverse Perspectives:** Even if we access diverse perspectives, it can be challenging to balance these diverse viewpoints and ensure that the policies developed reflect the interests of the entire community. Finding solutions that address conflicting opinions can be a complex task.

The first step in finding solutions that address competing needs is to gain the diverse points of view and list them. Building our tolerance for difficult conversations with empathy and curiosity is the only way to find creative solutions.

3. **Managing Expectations:** Engaging with the community and giving them a voice in decision-making processes can create high expectations.

It is important for the town council to manage these expectations effectively, ensuring that residents understand the

limitations of the process and the need to balance competing priorities.

4. ***Time and Expertise:*** Engaging with the community and incorporating their input takes time. The town council may face pressure to make quick decisions or meet tight deadlines, which could hinder the thoroughness of the human-centered approach. Balancing the need for timely decision-making with meaningful community engagement can be a delicate balancing act. To add to this challenge, we don't have adequate resources to collect and analyze data.

Utilizing expertise of our committees, academic experts, interns, and distributing the work among different town councilors and staff are ways to do the best we can.

5. ***Communication and Accessibility:*** Ensuring effective communication and accessibility to engage a diverse range of residents can be a challenge. Language barriers, technology limitations, or lack of awareness about participation opportunities may prevent certain groups from actively engaging in the process.

Efforts must be made to reach out to marginalized communities and ensure their voices are heard.

The community engagement plan empowers committees to navigate the process effectively and fosters a culture of collaboration and transparency. By implementing these steps, we demonstrate our commitment to inclusive decision-making, leveraging scientific evidence and inclusive language, and creating an encouraging and credible tone for the benefit of the Amherst community.

II. THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

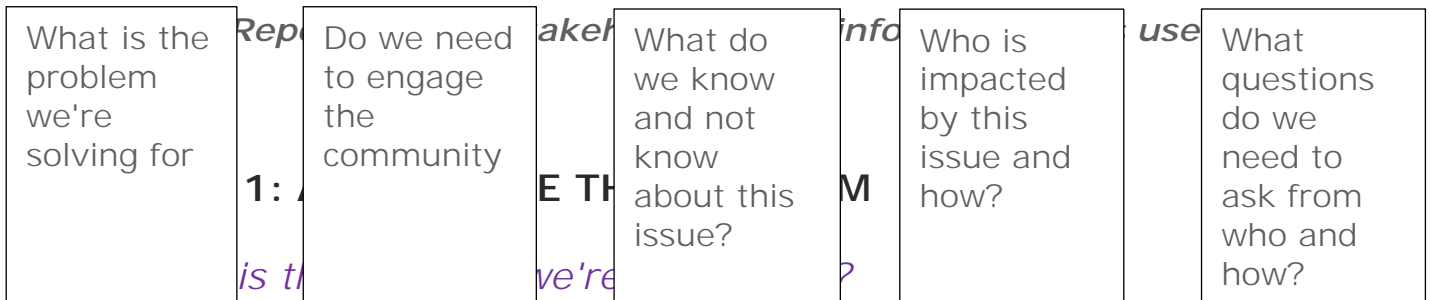
There are five steps in the community engagement process followed by post engagement measurement of effectiveness that can guide further actions and inform future engagements and sharing the results with stakeholders.

Each step in the plan included suggested questions and key points for consideration.

Figure 1: Steps in Community Engagement

Analysis of Data and Feedback

Post Engagement: What will success look like?



When a TCC is given an item for review, one of the first things is to articulate the problem that they are solving for and discern whether the problem is critical, time-sensitive, or important but not urgent.

1. What are existing issues or challenges that we're trying to address?
2. Are there any specific concerns or pain points that have been identified by community members or stakeholders?
3. Clarify the purpose and goals

4. Is this a priority for the Town Council that has been or will be included in Town Manager goals?
5. Who initiated/sponsored the change and what are their reasons behind it?
6. What are new solutions being proposed?
7. Do we have the staff and other resources to deal with this issue?
8. Are there any legal or regulatory requirements that need to be considered in addressing this problem?

STEP 2: ASSESS EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

What do we know and not know?

Before developing the outreach strategies, the TCC can look at what the town already knows based on past research done with the help of hired consultants, sponsors' research, staff knowledge, etc.

1. What research and past consultants' reports exist for this issue?
2. What are the anticipated impacts (both positive and negative) at the neighborhood level? What about at the town-wide level? Are there specific areas or communities that will be more affected than others?
3. What is the current level of community awareness about the proposal and its impact?
4. What have our community engagement efforts looked like in the past for this or similar projects? Were they effective or ineffective?
5. What are the possible consequences/outcomes (if any) of not engaging the community?

STEP 3: DISCERNING LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

What level of engagement with the community do we need?

This step helps the TCC decide if it needs to incorporate some level of community engagement.

1. Does the issue have potential environmental, economic, racial, and social justice, safety and/or health impacts on the community?
2. Have community members voiced interest, concerns, or opposition to our project?
3. Would public participation help our project achieve equitable outcomes for our community members?
4. Will we be asking the community to provide additional funding for this issue (i.e., assessment, tax increase, bond referendum, etc.)?
5. Are there legal or regulatory requirements that mandate community engagement for this specific issue?
6. What are the potential benefits of involving the community in decision-making?
7. Are there any potential risks or negative consequences if community engagement is not pursued?
8. Are there any existing community groups or organizations that should be involved or consulted?
9. How much time/money do we have?

STEP 4: IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS

Definition of Stakeholders: Stakeholders are individuals, groups, or organizations that are going to be impacted by or have expertise about a particular project, initiative, or decision. They play a crucial role in

shaping outcomes and contribute to the success and sustainability of a venture. Stakeholders can include community members, local businesses, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, community leaders, civic groups, educational institutions, external experts, town committees, and town staff.

Who is impacted by this issue?

Depending upon the nature of the project, the TCC will need to determine who is being impacted, who is already involved, and who is hard to reach.

1. Which specific community members/groups will be most impacted by this issue? Identifying the primary stakeholders who will be directly affected allows for targeted engagement efforts and ensures their perspectives are heard.
2. Which groups are already engaged or easy to reach? Recognizing the stakeholders who are already involved in community matters helps leverage their existing connections and knowledge to further enhance engagement.
3. Which groups are hard to reach? Identifying stakeholders who may be hard to reach is crucial to develop tailored strategies to ensure their voices are included and their needs are considered.
4. Who can we invite to help shape and/or carry out the community engagement? Involving key individuals or organizations who can contribute their expertise, resources, and influence in shaping and implementing community engagement initiatives fosters collaboration and shared ownership.
5. Which town departments, committees, and experts need to be invited for their expertise and feedback? Engaging relevant town departments, committees, and subject matter experts brings valuable insights and ensures a comprehensive approach that aligns with local governance and knowledge.

By addressing these questions, the Town Council can identify and involve the appropriate stakeholders, ensuring diverse perspectives, and fostering a sense of shared responsibility. This inclusive approach not only creates an optimistic and encouraging tone but also strengthens the credibility and effectiveness of the community engagement plan.

STEP 5: ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS

What questions to ask and how?

The strategies used to engage stakeholders need to be adaptive and reiterative based on the responses received. The goal is to streamline the communication across multiple channels that already exist and minimize work for council members and staff.

1. What questions do we need to ask to understand the lived experiences of stakeholders impacted by this issue?
2. What demographic questions will be useful? Understanding the demographics of stakeholders, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background, helps ensure inclusivity and tailor engagement efforts to meet diverse needs.
3. What channels of communication can we use? Identifying the most effective communication channels, such as town hall meetings, listening sessions, online surveys, social media platforms, or newsletters, enables us to reach stakeholders in ways that are convenient and accessible to them.
4. What tools of engagement are available?
5. Who is the town staff and committee lead person for engagement? Designating a dedicated staff member or committee lead for engagement ensures accountability, coordination, and effective management of the engagement process.

6. What is the timeline for engagement? Establishing a clear timeline with specific milestones and deadlines helps keep the engagement process organized, efficient, and transparent.
7. How do we thank the informants and share research findings? Expressing gratitude and acknowledging the contributions of stakeholders is essential. Consider ways to thank them, such as through personalized messages, recognition events, or public acknowledgments. Additionally, sharing research findings openly and transparently ensures stakeholders are informed about the outcomes of their input.

See Table 1 for a partial list of Key Channels and Tools and a list of Community Partners

Table 1: Partial List of Channels, Tools, and Partners

KEY CHANNELS & TOOLS	COMMUNITY PARTNERS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Councilor Newsletters and Social Media</i> 2. <i>Public Forums</i> 3. <i>Public Comment written</i> 4. <i>Town Website</i> 5. <i>Engage Amherst</i> 6. <i>Community Click Surveys</i> 7. <i>Community Events</i> 8. <i>District meetings</i> 9. <i>One on one conversations</i> 10. <i>Signs</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Amherst Indy, Mass Live, and the Gazette</i> 2. <i>Tony and Sally at UMass, Amherst & Hampshire College</i> 3. <i>Neighborhood associations</i> 4. <i>Non-Profits like Family Outreach for Amherst, Amherst Neighbors, Faith Organizations</i>

ANALYZING THE DATA AND FEEDBACK

1. *Who will analyze the data? (Try to get two people to analyze for inter-rater reliability)*
2. *How will the results be shared with the stakeholders?*
3. *Which town committees and experts need to be informed about the final choices made by the sponsors and committee for further feedback?*

POST ENGAGEMENT MEASUREMENT AND REPORTING

- *Record the participation as much as possible with respect to number and diversity in participation*
- *Identify which channels and tools were most effective*
- *Share engagement success with Town Council and stakeholders*

Thank the informants and share research findings. Expressing gratitude and acknowledging the contributions of stakeholders is essential. Consider ways to thank them, such as through personalized messages, recognition events, or public acknowledgments. Additionally, sharing research findings openly and transparently ensures stakeholders are informed about the outcomes of their input and how the information was incorporated into decision-making. It is equally important to highlight the reasons for not incorporating feedback. For example, for legal or feasibility reasons.

III. THE CHECKLIST

	Community Engagement Steps	Lead Person	Complete by
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Step 1: What is the problem we're solving for?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are existing issues or challenges that we're trying to address? 2. Are there any specific concerns or pain points that have been identified by community members or stakeholders? 3. Clarify the purpose and goals 4. Is this a priority for the Town Council that has been or will be included in Town Manager goals? 5. Who initiated/sponsored the change and what are their reasons behind it? 6. What are new solutions being proposed? 7. Do we have the staff and other resources to deal with this issue? 8. Are there any legal or regulatory requirements that need to be considered in addressing this problem? 		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Step 2: What do we know and not know?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What research and past consultants' reports exist for this issue? 2. What are the anticipated impacts (both positive and negative) at the neighborhood level? What about at the town-wide level? Are there specific areas or communities that will be more affected than others? 3. What is the current level of community awareness about the proposal and its impact? 4. What have our community engagement efforts looked like in the past for this or similar projects? Were they effective or ineffective? 5. What are the possible consequences/outcomes (if any) of not engaging the community? 		
	Community Engagement Steps	Lead Person	Complete by
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Step 3: Do we need to engage the community?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What level of engagement with the community do we need? 		

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. <i>Does the issue have potential environmental, economic, racial, and social justice, safety and/or health impacts on the community?</i> 3. <i>Have community members voiced interest, concerns, or opposition to our project?</i> 4. <i>Would public participation help our project achieve equitable outcomes for our community members?</i> 5. <i>Will we be asking the community to provide additional funding for this issue (i.e., assessment, tax increase, bond referendum, etc.)?</i> 6. <i>Are there legal or regulatory requirements that mandate community engagement for this specific issue?</i> 7. <i>What are the potential benefits of involving the community in decision-making?</i> 8. <i>Are there any potential risks or negative consequences if community engagement is not pursued?</i> 9. <i>Are there any existing community groups or organizations that should be involved consulted?</i> 6. <i>How much time/money do we have</i> 		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p style="text-align: center;">Step 4: Who is impacted by this issue?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Which specific community members/groups will be most impacted by this issue?</i> 2. <i>Which groups are already engaged or easy to reach?</i> 3. <i>Which groups are hard to reach?</i> 4. <i>Who can we invite to help shape and/or carry out the community engagement?</i> 5. <i>Which town departments, committees, and experts need to be invited for their expertise and feedback?</i> 		

	<p>Step 5: What questions to ask and how?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What questions do we need to ask to understand the lived experiences of stakeholders impacted by this issue? 2. What demographic questions will be useful? 3. What channels of communication can we use? 4. What tools of engagement are available? 5. Who is the town staff and committee lead for engagement? 6. What is the timeline for engagement? 7. How do we thank the informants and share research findings 		
	<p>Analyzing the Data and Feedback</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who will analyze the data? (Try to get two people to analyze for inter-rater reliability) 2. How will the results be shared with the stakeholders? 3. Which town committees need to be informed about the final choices made by the sponsors and committee? 		
	<p>POST ENGAGEMENT MEASUREMENT</p> <p>Ways to measure success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Record the participation as much as possible with respect to number and diversity in participation ▪ Identify which channels and tools were most effective ▪ Share engagement success with Town Council and Stakeholders <p>Reporting Back to Stakeholders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the information collected and analyzed on town websites etc. • Email the committees and experts how the community and expert input was incorporated or not incorporated in proposed bylaw/policy 		

IV. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This plan provides a template that Town Council Committees (TCC) can use when they are studying issues that need

community engagement. By following this plan, committees can systematically navigate the process of community engagement. A few other considerations to keep in mind.

1. **Articulate the Problem:** The first three steps of the plan, depicted in Figure 1, serve as a universal starting point for all committees. These steps allow committees to clearly define the problem at hand and determine if community engagement is necessary.
2. **Tailored Questions for Consideration:** The plan offers a series of questions and key points for each step. These serve as suggestions, but committees are encouraged to develop their own set of questions specific to the issue they are studying. This customization ensures a focused and relevant approach to community engagement.
3. **Designate Leadership Roles:** Once the decision to engage the community is made, the committee must assign a lead person or divide the necessary actions among committee members to implement the next steps of engagement. Additionally, the committee need to ask the Town Manager to identify a staff member who will collaborate with the TCC to execute the engagement plan effectively with respect to data collection and analysis. We also need to cultivate relationships with UMass and other colleges to have reliable access to expertise and dedicated interns who can benefit from real-world experience.
4. **Consolidate Stakeholder Input:** It is crucial to establish a systematic approach to consolidate and analyze the information received from stakeholders. This input becomes a valuable resource for discussions, further research, and informed decision-making. By actively involving stakeholders,

we foster a sense of ownership and inclusivity throughout the engagement process.

5. **Share the Findings:** It is essential to share the findings, follow up questions, and decisions made using this information with the relevant stakeholders.

V. REFERENCES

[Newton Ma Engagement](#): Good ideas and presentation using calendar, vision kits etc.

[Community Planning Tool Kit](#): Good list of questions for planning community engagement

[Penn State Community Engagement](#): A comprehensive tool list for community engagement