

# Community is key: Building stronger through community engagement



**Community engagement** is a process that invites members of a community to envision what they want the built environment within their community to look like. Discussions directly with a community can better define the desired outcomes of community planning through active engagement, where residents are empowered to provide insight into the community's past, present, and future identity of their community. For example, a planner leading an engagement initiative might look for local perspectives on design features, public spaces, assets, and a space's overall look and character.

Further, **community-driven planning** places community decision-making and leadership at the forefront of the planning process, guiding a project from inception to completion with guidance and support from planners. It's an approach that invites local community members to identify their goals and create their vision to achieve these goals. Community-driven planning fosters internal and external partnerships, all while leveraging community strengths and leadership.

Use this guidance to inform best practices for effective community engagement and strategies for uplifting community-led and centered projects.

## Key discussion points

- 1 Rather than simply impose change on communities, consider strategies for creating a vision developed from lived experiences and power-building within your community.
- 2 Before entering a community, identify key stakeholders, establish a resident-led team, and identify community priorities.
- 3 Consider the distinction between community engagement and community-driven projects and how to create a vision from the community that is not predetermined by a planner.
- 4 Meet people where they're at: When planning community engagement activities, consider cultural events and activities, popular locations, and language differences.
- 5 Break down the "us" versus "them" framework: Share leadership and decision-making power, learn and acknowledge the history of racial and social injustices, recognize and value local knowledge, meet people where they are, and build intentional partnerships.



*"It's not that people don't have a vision; it's that people aren't being engaged. Culture is a comfortable way to make conversations relatable and relevant."*

– Jenn Tran,  
Community Organizer,  
Viet Place Collective



*"Identity and authenticity matter and must be included. It speaks to how development is with the community and for the community."*

– Manuel Ochoa,  
Founder and Principle,  
Ochoa Urban Collaborative

# Questions to ask



- 1 How can you create a plan that is centered on community needs?
- 2 Whose voices have been left out of the planning process? What changes to the engagement process would ensure these voices are included?
- 3 What are the biggest priorities within your community ?



*“When redeveloping, the question is always who’s culture are we prioritizing? Whose culture are we marginalizing? The process of redevelopment in an equitable framework is about prioritizing what is there and what has helped a neighborhood thrive.”*

**-Willow Lung-Amam,**  
Associate Professor of Urban Studies and  
Planning, University of MD College Park

## Case Study on Community Engagement

Smart Growth America staff was excited to take attendees to the 11th Street Bridge Park during our site tours at the 2024 Equity Summit. This 11th Street Bridge Park is a public-private partnership between the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) and Building Bridges Across the River that aims to re-engage people with—and reconnect the neighborhoods on—the river.

Starting in 2012, Building Bridges and DDOT engaged with 200 residents and community organizations—like faith and civic groups and business owners—to help repair and re-establish trust and encourage community perspective on the project. Although there was enthusiasm surrounding the project, a community-driven program was established to alleviate concerns and empower members of the community to shape the project in their eyes, resulting in the inclusion of things like an environmental education center, performance space, and playground.

DDOT and Building Bridges continue to work with the community to implement their ideas, and the park is expected to open in 2025. To learn more about the 11th Street Park project, visit [Building Bridges DC](#). You can also view [this webinar recording](#) from the 2023 Equity Summit, where Scott Kratz from Building Bridges spoke about the project during a fireside chat on reconnecting communities.

# What's Next?

- Community Leaders:** Build capacity, share resources, and inspire your community to make informed decisions about the change they wish to see in their communities.
- Planners:** Familiarize yourself with your community's history, demographics, housing and economic conditions, social networks, cultural norms, and values. Review relevant reports, previous development projects, and local policies like zoning laws.
- Policymakers:** Listen deeply to community concerns, needs, hopes, visions, and dreams, Use that information to create or update policies that are inclusive of all community members.

## Recommended resources



Check out: [Principles of Equitable Land Reuse Handout](#) from Groundwork USA and CCLR.

Review: [This overview](#) of community engagement in the planning process.

Watch: [This video from Wenatchee, WA](#), for an example of a strong community engagement strategy for a quick build project.

Learn: [The three types of community engagement](#).

You can also learn more about the process [in this case study](#).

Read: [Citizen Lab's Community Engagement, Practitioner's Guide](#).