

# Post-pandemic Trends to Expect in Community Engagement



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COVID-19 changed how we live and work, dine and recreate, collaborate and communicate. When we get past the danger of this pandemic, what will return to “normal” or the way it was before COVID-19, and what are we doing today that will never “go back?” Will the streets that have been closed to automobiles and turned into beautiful blocks of outdoor dining, urban parks and dedicated to pedestrians stay that way? Will consumers go back into stores after discovering the convenience of online shopping and home delivery? Will people who have been able to work remotely from home go back into the corporate office? What we do know is that community engagement is changed forever and that is mostly a good thing.

- **Snapshot of the past.** Community engagement was centered largely around trying to let people know that there are a couple of public meetings or open houses they are invited to attend to provide their input. Progressive community engagement involved going to where people were – like festivals, association meetings and neighborhood events. A project-specific community or open house may have been attended by less than 100 people. Attendance of 200 was considered a big success. In-person engagement tools such as voting with dots, sharing thoughts on sticky notes and keypad polling all helped give a voice to everyone who attended. This type of community

engagement worked in our prepandemic environment.

- **The pivot.** By the end of March, across the country in-person community engagement mostly ceased. Immediately, social media became a critical channel to reach and inform constituents of upcoming engagement opportunities. Virtual open houses, town hall meetings via Zoom, online surveys and interactive websites were launched. In most cases, robust virtual replacements garnered significantly higher participation than traditional in-person gatherings. COVID-19 made us reinvent how we communicate with communities with social distancing in mind and that has brought this process some lessons learned and some future benefit.

- **A view of the future.** What we learned around engaging communities in 2020 has been critical to inform 2021 trends and beyond. We want to ensure that community members’ understanding and perspective on issues, topics or “the project” are informed, heard and equitably represented:

- *Equity and inclusion.* To hear every voice, we must reach the often marginalized and disenfranchised populations. Whether virtual or in-person, community engagement must be more responsibility for the people who already reach these people. A way to achieve this is through engagement ambassadors, providing training and materials for city staff, volunteers, and university students to be involved in conducting public engagement to



Improvements to the pedestrian mall in downtown Aspen is a project that hundreds of businesses owners, residents and visitors care about. The project website hosts narrative presentations to ensure that anyone can get information about the project at any time.



*Aspen's fountains delight children and adults alike.*

diverse and often underrepresented populations.

- *Full translation.* Using Zoom's feature to have live translation of online events enables more people to participate. Also, Zoom breakout rooms organized by language provide small groups a nonintimidating venue for discussion.
- *Community engagement window.* Windows of time, spanning two to three weeks, replace date-specific input opportunity. While the window is open, constituents can participate in online surveys, attend virtual open houses, watch recorded presentations or videos, interact with websites, stop by a popup kiosk and fill out a mailed survey for a statistically valid survey.
- *StoryMaps.* An easy way to create narrative, illustrate spatial relationships, and add photos and videos to a user-friendly website is StoryMaps by the Environmental Systems Research Institute. Combined with embedded survey questions, this is very effective in educating the communities about what the project, issue or topic entails.
- *Live Q&A.* Incorporating this into live sessions streamed to Instagram or Facebook to submit a question about the project.
- *Mimic the real thing.* Providing virtual experiences that are user-friendly by replicating experiences that used to be in person whether it be through Mural (a digital workspace for virtual collaboration), Bang the Table (a digital engagement platform often favored by cities and counties) or the easily accessible Google Drive.
- *Crowdsourcing.* Getting people engaged by asking them to help collect data for the planning process through crowdsourcing. This provides people a nice break from being isolated during the pandemic, particularly retirees, and a chance to enjoy being a part of the process rather than being "talked to." In Loudoun County, Virgin-

ia, we implemented volunteer trail mapping, and "Share your Story" oral history recordings were collected for another project – Bailey Drive Gateway in Southeast Raleigh, North Carolina, the first African-American neighborhood – with the community group Partners for Environmental Justice. The oral histories are now being used to create public art in the neighborhood while the park design is in process by artist Tiffany Baker.

- *Hot spots.* These can be set up across the town in places such as at libraries, community centers, arts centers with computers and printed materials so people can have access to the materials and polling. Leveraging relationships with community organizations to advertise materials and paper input opportunities where underrepresented groups are still gathering (i.e., food banks, churches, parks, etc.)
- *Narrated presentations.* Videos that remain on the project website, along with ongoing promotion, also has been a benefit to let people review when their schedule allows. Narrated presentations, prerecorded videos and StoryMaps allow people to access information on their own time, often catering to a different audience than a hosted virtual public meeting.
- *QR codes.* Thanks to paperless menus at many restaurants, people are becoming accustomed to using QR codes. Take a picture on your smartphone and you are directed to the menu. Or in this case, the project website or community engagement. A walking tour for the 56 Acres Park Master Plan in Mariposa, California, was set up with QR codes for people to take the survey online with hard copy options as well. It was combined with a StoryMap/Qualtrics survey combo for those who didn't want to go out in person. \\

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**Full translation:** For the Denver Parks and Recreation Strategic Acquisition Plan project, the virtual public meeting offered live Vietnamese, Spanish and English translation. The online survey was also offered in these three languages. In order to get a more diverse and representative response to the survey, the survey was promoted by working with city staff, youth, partner organizations, and others to share the link in their networks. Due to this targeted engagement approach, they received over 1,600 survey responses were received, mirroring the demographics of the city and county of Denver while also building relationships with *these* ambassadors for future opportunities.