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Community Engagement and Outreach

Designing Healthy, Equitable, Resilient, and Economically Vibrant Places

"Cities (and counties) have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."

—Jane Jacobs

Introduction

Robust and inclusive community engagement is a vital component of drafting and updating a general plan. State law requires the local planning agency to provide opportunities for the involvement of the community. Such involvement should include public agencies, public utility companies, community groups, and others through hearings or other appropriate methods (Gov. Code § 65351). The law also requires that a jurisdiction make a diligent effort to include all economic groups when drafting, adopting and implementing its housing element (Gov. Code § 65583(c)(8)). For the purposes of this chapter, the term "update" will refer to adoption of new general plans as well as amendments to existing plans.

By law, cities and counties must hold at least two public hearings before adopting a general plan: one by the planning commission and another by the legislative body (either the city council or the board of supervisors) (Gov. Code §65353(a), §65355). Government Code section 65351 requires that during the preparation or amendment of a general plan, the planning agency must provide opportunities for community input through public hearings and any other means the planning agency deems appropriate. Specifically, Government Code section 65351 requires that the planning agency shall "provide opportunities for the involvement of citizens, California Native American tribes, public agencies, public utility companies, and civic, education, and other community groups." Government Code section 65357 requires that copies of the documents adopting or amending a general plan, including the diagrams and text, shall be made available to the public. The courts have found a general plan amendment invalid when it was not made available to the public (*City of Poway v. City of San Diego* (1991) 229 Cal. App. 3d 847, 861). Most planning departments, however, conduct more than the minimal number of hearings. Many jurisdictions undertake extensive outreach that exceeds the minimum statutory requirements. The spectrum of community engagement ranges from informing and consulting the public to involving, collaborating, and ultimately empowering local communities.

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A general plan update affects every aspect and member of the community. Broad participation – particularly direct or representative participation of local residents – will help achieve desired outcomes.

Many entities have recognized the ability of strong community engagement to improve local conditions, inform policy, enhance equity, and create better program outcomes. Community engagement as a process can also help strengthen community bonds. Creating the opportunity for community dialogue throughout the general plan update – while sometimes challenging – can result in a more informed plan with more public support.

As stated in Chapter 2, a general plan should start with a community's vision, but community engagement should continue throughout the process, from visioning to adoption and implementation, depending on the scope and extent of the project. A thorough update for an average-sized city typically requires at least one full year or more. The nature of the outreach process and its intended outcomes will differ in each stage of the update:
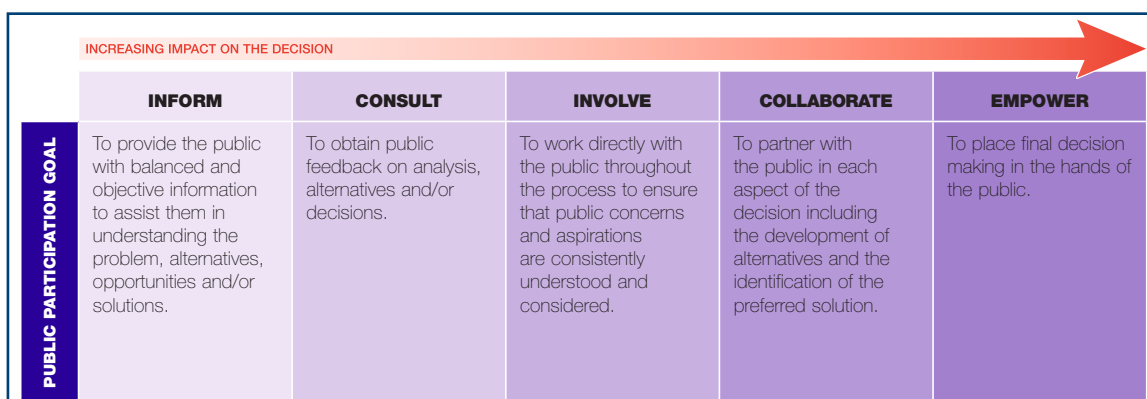
1. **Exploration**: The initial stages of outreach allow stakeholders to identify community strengths, assets, priorities for future development, and areas for improvement and, thus, to start the process of formulating a vision for the future. In addition, the exploration phase presents an opportunity to educate residents about land use planning principles prior to more extensive outreach.

2. **Collaborative Action**: After establishing a general baseline for community goals, planners should engage collaboratively with partners, considering different options for reaching the set goals and aligning policy priorities to attain the vision.

3. **Decision Making**: Exploration and collaboration should identify various policy priorities necessary for achieving the general plan vision. These priorities should then inform a framework to help identify policy options, choose among them, and assemble a draft plan.

4. **Monitoring and Evaluation**: Community engagement should continue after the plan is drafted. Updates on successful policy implementation and implementation challenges can be an opportunity to elicit feedback and help evaluate progress toward community goals.

Web-based engagement

Propel Vallejo developed a concise electronically available web document to highlight various planning options based on community input. By synthesizing all of the available information, the city created scenarios to elicit more input and inform the decision-making stage.

This chapter discusses various issues planning departments may consider when designing a public engagement process. It also provides tools and lists resources to inform the outreach process and ensure community involvement, input, and support for the general plan. As illustrated by Figure 7 below, statutory requirements only require limited meetings and fall into the "inform" area on the engagement spectrum. However, many jurisdictions recognize the benefits of a more involved process, and offer more extensive engagement and collaborative opportunities. Some communities have even conducted such an extensive engagement process that it moves towards "empower" in the engagement spectrum. The scenario land use planning and data informed process in the Fresno and the Vallejo plans are examples.

Figure 7: Public Engagement Spectrum

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/foundations_course/IAP2_P2_Spectrum_FINAL.pdf

Process Design

Designing the outreach process before starting a general plan update helps ensure adequate input from various stakeholders. Unexpected events can occur during an update, including changes in elected leadership, funding, and staff. Having an outreach plan in place will help keep the process on track. In addition to any organized participation activities, the Brown Act requires that meetings of appointed advisory committees, planning commissions, and local legislative bodies be public. This section provides guidance for developing an outreach plan.

Establish an Outreach Strategy

Establishing a road map to plan public engagement efforts may help guide outreach throughout the process. Local jurisdictions vary tremendously throughout California, and engagement strategies will also vary based on local circumstances. Local communities should help define the outreach strategy most relevant to their needs. There are some issues to consider across planning for all areas, however. These include:

• Funding available for engagement activities, including translation services as needed

• Timeline for activities

• Expectation setting for stakeholders

- Staff time, knowledge, and other expertise necessary to conduct outreach and education

- Communication tools available

- Process to ensure efforts are transparent, accessible, and fun

- Methods available to capture and record dialogue at outreach events

- Variety of meeting spaces

- Methods to continue engagement after the initial process has been completed

Some helpful tools in outreach include:

Oversight Responsibility

Assigning a staff member to oversee and be responsible for the engagement and outreach process will ensure dedicated attention to this important procedural step.

Advisory Committee or Board

Establishing a diverse advisory board or committee comprised of experts and community members can be helpful throughout the general plan update process. An advisory body can provide insight as to how to reach multiple populations, address potentially controversial issues, understand sensitive community needs, and represent a greater portion of the community. Establishment of the advisory body early in the process allows the board to inform the general outreach strategy from the beginning. An advisory board can also establish what community engagement will include for its own jurisdiction, and how community and stakeholder input is handled and communicated back to the public. Additionally, an advisory body can help build community capacity on issues such as data use and evaluation, as well as the historical context of land use planning. A manageably sized advisory body – around 10 people with an effective facilitator – should include multiple voices from the community and represent its diversity. General plan advisory board members should be drawn from the broad range of communities that exist within a jurisdiction to represent the varied interests that the public engagement process hopes to capture and to inclusively inform and enhance the general outreach strategy.

The following categories of advisory body members should be considered:

- Business leaders and/or representatives from chambers of commerce

- Representatives from the technology sector

- Local agency leaders, including water agencies, fire departments, law enforcement, parks and recreation, health officers, public works leads, and others

- Community development leaders

- Health leaders

- Representatives and advocates from various income groups, special needs populations, and neighborhoods in the jurisdiction

- Multi-lingual representatives

- State and/or federal agency leaders, if the jurisdiction has a high proportion of public lands

- School representatives

- Faith-based community representatives

- Agriculture and food system representatives

- Environmental justice representatives

- Academics

- Local philanthropic organizations

- Individual community leaders

Survey of Overlapping Efforts

Multiple public engagement processes may be in progress simultaneously. For instance, outreach to solicit input on an application for grant funding may occur at the same time as outreach for an update of the general plan. Concurrent outreach processes can confuse participants; and this confusion poses a potential challenge for recruitment and involvement. Additionally, other public or private agencies – for example, departments of parks and recreation, hospitals, departments of public health, or non-governmental organizations – may be conducting outreach simultaneously. Increased awareness of ongoing efforts to gain input can help avoid overlapping or conflicting outreach efforts and might even allow outreach sessions to be combined.

Scale

Outreach for a county's general plan is a much larger undertaking than for a city's due to the broader catchment area. Stakeholders may also have less of a perceived stake in the process because county general planning is further removed from their local jurisdiction. Sharing how information will be incorporated into the planning process can relate the importance of participation and increase community input.

Partnership

All affected stakeholders should be represented in any public participation process. In a general plan process, this is the entire community. Partnership with various stakeholders also provides the opportunity to establish paid or unpaid volunteers to work within the community during the outreach process. Stakeholder groups in the general plan process may include:

- Community and neighborhood groups

- School districts, charter schools, and county offices of education

- County transportation commissions

- Utilities and public service providers of:

  » Energy

» Water, including water supply and wastewater. These entities involve flood/stormwater districts, regional water management groups, (groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs), reclamation districts, etc.

» Telecommunications

» Waste

- Regional groups that can identify synergies with other regional efforts

- Affordable housing and special needs population representatives and advocates

- Non-profit and for-profit builders

- State and federal partners, as appropriate

- Educational institutions

- Industry and business

- Civic and community service organizations

- Non-governmental organizations

- Religious communities

- Existing boards and commissions, such as planning boards, departments of parks and recreation, etc.

- Other public agencies

- Topical experts:

    » Groups working on climate change

    » County health departments

    » Environmental justice groups

    Tribal leaders

    Innovation or technology officers

    Local food groups

    Agricultural community members

Engaging more members of the community helps ensure a general plan that serves the needs of all residents

Source: http://www.futour.it/english/?p=48

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Tribal Consultation

When adopting or amending a General Plan, or designating open space, local governments must consult with California Native American tribes traditionally affiliated with the general plan area for the purpose of preserving or mitigating impacts to places, features, and objects described in Sections 5097.9 and 5097.993 of the Public Resources Code that are located within the city's or county's jurisdiction (Gov. Code § 65352.3, 65562.5). For more information about this consultation requirement, see the Governor's Office of Planning and Research's Supplement to the General Plan Guidelines, the Tribal Consultation Guidelines.

Cultural Considerations

Cultural differences may be present between and among professional groups as well as between and among community members. Reaching out to different professional groups and organizations not traditionally involved in planning may present additional challenges and opportunities. Understanding different interaction norms, priorities, levels of comfort with professional terminology, and expectations for project completion is essential to a productive process.

It is important to consider cultural diversity throughout the design of the community engagement process, including both overt differences, such as literacy level, socioeconomic status, and language, and more nuanced differences such as local history and cultural norms. Designing a process that is sensitive to all these considerations may help encourage broader, more equitable, and more informed participation.

To ensure equitable outreach, the following factors should be considered:

Literacy Level: It may be more difficult to reach out to Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals, immigrant communities, or people with lower educational attainment. Planning agencies should design outreach materials and events to accommodate different literacy levels and provide background information when referring to complex concepts. Avoid the use of acronyms where possible.

Socioeconomic Status: Groups with lower socioeconomic status are often disproportionately affected by environmental hazards while facing greater barriers to participation in efforts to remediate them. These barriers may be addressed by considering factors such as location and timing of outreach, accessibility by public transportation, availability of childcare, and availability of food. Reviewing demographic information, such as the data available in the American Community Survey (ACS), can help identify the potential needs of each community.

Language: All communication should be done in the major languages spoken in the community. This includes any advertising and written background materials as well as live interpretation at key public events. Some documents, such as the draft general plan or the draft environmental impact report, may be infeasible to translate in their entirety. In such cases, the planning agency should consider translating an executive summary into the major languages spoken in the community. Interpreters should be available at meetings when it is clear that non-English speaking members of the community will be present. Many local non-profit organizations can provide minimal or low cost services for public benefit.

Age: Aging populations have specific needs that should be addressed to capture their input in the process. Considering time of day and location of events, as well as Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) access to events and services available at the locations, will help include more elderly residents. The needs of young residents must also be considered, including outreach

methods that benefit multiple groups such as social media and online platforms, location access and amenities, and innovative tools for discussion at events.

Local History: Certain communities may have participated in previous outreach efforts that did not result in change. Over time, either not being included or participating and/or not feeling utilized may affect future participation. Understanding the local context is helpful prior to beginning outreach. Fostering dialogue around racial inequities that have existed in the land use context can be challenging. Jurisdictions have started to engage with skilled facilitators to have conversations that advance participation and engagement opportunities. In particular, specific outreach to tribal governments should be considered.

Cultural Norms: California is rich in diversity. Each city and county across the state is comprised of different ethnic groups from around the world. From 1980-2010, the percentage of people of color, for example, increased from 33.4 percent to 59.8 percent, and is expected to increase to 73.3 percent by 2040. Some community members may not be as familiar with the democratic form of government and the ability to openly share opinions; others may be accustomed to different gender roles, or may be fearful to have conversations and dialogue recorded. It is hard to learn all of the cultural nuances for each group in the community, but working in partnership with local non-profits or other groups skilled at working across cultures can help ensure all groups are able to participate in a meaningful outreach process.

Outreach Structure

Community members and other stakeholders have many competing interests and limited time. Allowing different levels and types of involvement in the process can help foster participation. For example, going to places where people already gather—a community health center, a street fair, a cultural event, a public event at a local religious or community center, or a community event at a local school—may allow attendees to give input without a large time commitment. This is an especially helpful mode of outreach when looking for feedback on specific topics, such as health, equity, and environmental justice. Meeting stakeholders in locations they are familiar and comfortable with can also help to bridge cultural and trust gaps. Other more time-intensive activities, such as focus groups, charrettes, and workshops, can be made available for stakeholders who are interested in providing more in-depth input. The structure of outreach is also important for transparency and continuing communication throughout the process of a plan update. Ongoing information sharing can help maintain community relationships and build trust in the process, especially if culturally appropriate communication methods are used. Web-based communications, for example, may exclude stakeholder groups without regular access to the Internet, and should be supplemented by other methods for greater reach across groups.

Data

Data and data visualizations can be powerful tools to catalyze community engagement. Some local jurisdictions have used maps with geospatial data and charts to examine transit routes, map community assets and risks, or share health outcome information to allow community members to understand planning in a tangible way. Data presentations should be tailored to their specific audience. For instance, some members might want specific details, including how the data are generated and collected. Other stakeholder groups may only be interested in general associations and how the data fit into the process. Missing data should be considered alongside existing data. Including funds in the budget to collect data as the general plan process proceeds will help address identified gaps in data availability.

There are also methods to allow community members to collect local data themselves. Tools such as walk audits, surveys of building types, and community photos help communities envision improvement while increasing potential participation. Considering how these data are valued – versus other data sets and sources such as traditional data, including how much weight they will carry in the process and how public contributors will be incorporated – is important to help ensure improved community data and input.

On the Horizon

As technology has advanced in the private sector, people have become accustomed to using the Internet and their personal cell phones to locate services, buy products, fund projects through crowdsourcing, and share their lives on social media. This constant and immediate interaction is changing the cultural norms for level of involvement with business, other community members, and, ultimately, with government agencies. Groups such as Code for America build open source technology to improve access to government services. Some places are starting to allow citizens to use personal cell phones to do surveys of local conditions, tweet responses to proposed policy options, or even provide their commentary online for local city council meetings rather than participate in person. As more local jurisdictions create positions for innovation officers and facilitate new ways of interacting with local government, planning departments will likely

Technology continues to create new methods of engaging the community in analysis and decision making

Source: https://www.pexels.com/search/analytics/

have new opportunities for engagement. However, jurisdictions should not ignore age and cultural differences in the rate of adoption of new technology as potential methods of engagement increase. As with any strategy, balancing alternative methods and using various tools to engage diverse perspectives will help increase input and prevent unintentional exclusion of community members.

Partnering for increased engagement in Salinas

In fall 2013, the City of Salinas initiated an Economic Development Element (EDE) planning process. The City's initial goal was to position Salinas for outside investment to become the agricultural technology capital. However, when the City asked local community based organizations (CBOs) about their economic development priorities, multiple new topics emerged including training for transitioning agricultural workers; reducing poverty; support for local entrepreneurs and small businesses; more childcare facilities; education and youth development; and tracking the city's economic indicators by neighborhood, race/ethnicity, and income group.

The CBOs also wanted improved community engagement for the EDE process. Early activities required a technical understanding which intimidated numerous residents (and CBOs) into not participating. While 75% of Salinas residents identify as Latino and 66% of residents speak Spanish at home, the workshop presentations and materials were all in English with limited Spanish interpretation assistance. The collaborative Building Healthy Communities

– East Salinas (BHC), identified this need and entered an MOU with the City to provide additional engagement opportunities tailored to the Latino residents in East Salinas (93% Latino).

This supplemental effort consisted of a pop-up workshop, a community workshop, and house meetings to learn about East Salinas residents' challenges with employment, education, shopping, and businesses. Additionally, BHC convened bi-weekly meetings with coalition members so they could collaboratively provide support and feedback to the City on engagement and policy proposals.

The BHC-led pop-up workshop's materials and hosts were bilingual and activities included a vision photo booth, goal prioritization dot exercise, and posters that asked people for ideas about "Small Businesses, Entrepreneurship and Innovation" and "Youth Development." The activities did not require any prior knowledge of the planning process or of economic development policy. A few months later, BHC and the Monterey County Health Department co-hosted a community workshop in East Salinas, held in Spanish with English translation. Activities framed EDE topics at an individual or household level making the discussion accessible to all attendees. Community leaders also organized, facilitated, and summarized small house meetings in Spanish to hear from many undocumented and mono-lingual Spanish-speaking families. From these activities, the resident's and business owners and workers articulated their dreams for their families and Salinas youth.

BHC's involvement in the process shifted the EDE's framework, promoted inclusion of policies with a health and equity framework, and created an entire quality of life section in the element. Evaluation metrics were modified to show breakdowns by race and ethnicity and include health and quality of life indicators. This process demonstrated that East Salinas residents have valuable contributions when culturally-appropriate community engagement opportunities are available. The City now sees BHC and other local CBOs as partners and allies. City of Salinas Planning RFPs now include requirements for processes to include fully bi-lingual and collaborative planning processes.

Source: Beth Altshuler, Raimi + Associates; Building Healthy Communities — East Salinas; and City of Salinas

Engagement Tools

There are a wide variety of engagement tools that can be used to inform and engage the community in a public participation process. Tools should be chosen based on the needs, strengths, and resources of the community. Using multiple techniques can help to reach a wider range of community residents. Community members who help develop the general plan may become champions throughout the process, helping carry the plan through adoption and implementation. Below are examples of different tools that may be employed.

Meetings, Workshops, and Events

Well-timed meetings help solicit input and keep participants informed. Ensuring that meetings and outreach activities are held at a variety of times and locations—after work hours, on weekends, or at facilities that are easily accessible via public transit—helps increase potential participation. Meeting types can vary depending on a variety of factors, including the meeting's purpose or its participants. In addition to regular meeting structures, project leads can use innovative methods such as story telling, games, or

white board activities to capture input. Meeting types include, but are not limited to:

- Public hearings

- Town hall meetings

- Open houses

- Events in non-traditional places, such as farmers' markets, churches, health fairs, school events, and community fairs

- Panel discussions

- Neighborhood meetings

- Meetings of civic organizations, such as chambers of commerce

- Focus groups

- Small in-home meetings

Activities

Activities are a helpful tool to expand thinking and demonstrate new opportunities and possibilities. For example, conducting a "walk audit," where local residents physically walk around as a group and collect standardized information about the condition of the built environment, could highlight infrastructure and safety needs. Activities can also provide group-learning opportunities and build relationships between community members and planning and consulting staff.

Tours

Tours to other cities and counties can show decision-makers and participants examples from other communities and help them visualize ideas for their own community. Tours within an agency's own jurisdiction are also a good way to experience parts of the city or district with which participants may be less familiar. Organized tours of recent or proposed projects within the community may also provide a good basis of discussion for decision makers and participants.

Open Houses

Open houses can allow community members to view plan proposals, data, and maps in a casual environment that allows people to come and go as their schedules allow. Open houses can be held at a church, school, community center, local business, or other location easily accessible to the public. Planners and visitors should be able to talk informally about the planning process, with translators present as necessary. Open houses can be combined with other tools, such as written or visual surveys.

Community Image Surveys and Photo Voice

Photos can be a powerful engagement tool to change the built environment. Various methods have been used with photos. Community Image Surveys are a visual preference method that are scored and used to assess preferences. Photovoice is a participatory method where users can capture elements about the environment and use them as a starting point for a discussion about their community.

Design Charrettes

Design charrettes are interactive, visual, and time-intensive events where the public can participate with interdisciplinary teams of planners, architects, engineers, and artists, as well as each other. While charrettes are often used for specific plans and individual projects, they can also help community members visualize what they want their community to look like. These preferences can then be translated into general plan goals and specifications.

Web Based Meeting and Engagement Tools

Webinars, online conferences, and Internet collaboration tools allow for easy, convenient engagement with the public. People with busy schedules, families, or limited mobility may find participation simpler via web-based tools where they can enter questions or comments based on their own availability. Web-based tools range from simple online webinars or meetings to open forums, documents with commenting capability, and collaborative images for visioning. While some community members may not have access or interest in using online tools, including them in an engagement strategy may increase participation.

Mailings – email and regular mail

Mailings can be used to advertise process, request input, or share information. Per Government Code sections 65091 and 65092, some notices must be mailed in prescribed ways, but in all other situations the types of mailing used should be based on the desired input goals. Mass surveys or opinion mailings work well to broaden the range of participants in the process and can also share information about process scope, timelines, website links, data availability and other issues. Newsletters work to keep the public updated on the process as well. Some communities utilize existing mailing services, such as utility bills, to reduce costs.

Surveys

Surveys are most often used in the beginning of a general plan process to help identify community issues and concerns and to identify residents' opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of their community. A survey can help identify issues to be addressed by the general plan and areas where residents would like more information. A good survey includes the public early in the process, broadens the range of participants by including residents who do not come to meetings, and publicizes the general plan process. A statistically valid survey of local opinion, while more difficult to conduct, can be persuasive to decision makers and the public. Including demographic questions in a survey will help identify any inequities in response rates and detect important differences in opinions among groups.

There are a number of methods available to improve access and equity in surveys. Pilot testing the survey instrument with an advisory group or with a diverse group of pilot subjects may improve the form. The survey should be piloted in every language in which it will be offered to ensure that translations are conveying the intended information. While this will add time to the process, it may ultimately yield more accurate results and improve public perception of the data. Door-to-door surveys may also be an effective outreach method and can yield a higher response rate than traditional mail surveys.

Additionally, soliciting feedback on data interpretation may be useful before finalizing analyses. Because different interests may interpret the same data in multiple ways, providing an opportunity for discussion, feedback, and suggestions on how to analyze results may provide a stronger sense of transparency and trust in the process.

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Beyond outreach

Conducting outreach with communities before and during the general plan update is key to having a more informed plan. Capturing input along the way is important for presentations back to city councils and county boards of supervisors to show how the plan is informed by community input. Beyond initial outreach, it is also important to have a mechanism in place to communicate with stakeholders who were involved during the update process, so they are aware of how their input was incorporated into the plan. Mechanisms to keep track of progress after the plan has been adopted have been well received in communities.

Jurisdictions have used different mechanisms to do this work. Some jurisdictions have assigned the various components of the general plan to different departments, allowing stakeholders to follow progress based on goals that align with the adpoted goals of existing agencies.