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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR MAIN STREET TRANSFORMATION



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Main Street America™ has been helping to revitalize older and historic commercial districts since the late 1970s. Today, it is a movement consisting of more than 1,600 neighborhoods and communities, rural and urban, who share both a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development. Main Street America is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Community Engagement for Main Street Transformation was authored by Ellen Shepard, CEO of Community Allies, with additional contributions from Vicki Pozzebon of Prospera Partners and staff of the National Main Street Center.

Community Allies helps communities build wealth and resilience through thriving, sustainable commercial districts with locally-owned businesses and a joyful sense of place. Community Allies also provides organizational development and leadership coaching to non-profits and social enterprises in order to deepen their impact. Community Allies is fiercely committed to inclusion, teaching its clients strategies to cultivate passionate and productive community engagement. CommunityAllies.net

This guide was shaped by input from the National Main Street Center board-appointed Four Point Refresh Task Force. The Task Force was led by Main Street veteran and NMSC Board Member Mary Thompson.

FOUR POINT REFRESH TASK FORCE

MARY THOMPSON Task Force Chair, Member of NMSC Board of Directors

BARBARA SIDWAY Founding NMSC Board of Directors Chair

JANE JENKINS Downtown Oklahoma City, Inc.

FRED KENT Project for Public Spaces

BEPPIE LEGRAND Main Street South Carolina

ED MCMAHON Urban Land Institute

MANUEL T. OCHOA Enterprise Community Partners, Inc.

ANWAR SALEEM H Street Main Street

ASCALA T. SISK NeighborWorks America

PATRICE FREY National Main Street Center

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“There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about.”

–Margaret Wheatley

Successful cities and towns know that creating a thriving downtown is about leveraging your assets. While we often think about assets in terms of physical characteristics—historic building stock, scenic landscapes, or inviting streetscapes—a community’s greatest asset is its people: community members, civic leaders, business owners, visitors, and more. Thoughtfully and strategically engaging those people is key to the long-term sustainability of a revitalization initiative.

Main Street is distinguished by its commitment to a community-driven process, one that brings diverse stakeholders from all sectors together, inviting them to be proactive participants in the transformation of downtown. The Main Street Approach situates community engagement at the heart of the revitalization process. While Main Street-style revitalization looks different in every community and district, it always reflects the input, wisdom, and perspective of local leaders, business owners, and residents.

Actively engaging these populations provides a foundation for outlining the community’s identity, expectations, and ideals while confirming real and perceived perceptions, needs, and opportunities. It also ensures that the vision is a true reflection of the diversity of the community. Ultimately, the feedback you receive, insights you gain, and stakeholders you bring on board should directly inform the development of your Transformation Strategies.

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This guide will provide you with a practical framework for understanding how to launch or strengthen your community engagement efforts, and actionable tools to put to use in your own community. What follows is very much an overview; take advantage of the links to more information provided throughout and at the end. And be sure to read the National Main Street Center’s accompanying resource guides for support in turning the fruits of your community engagement process into actionable strategies for revitalizing your downtown or commercial district.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Engagement invites all of the voices in your community to be equal partners in determining the community's future, taking ownership of the process, means, and outcomes of your revitalization efforts. It takes time and resources, but it's worth it; community engagement is the only way to build consensus and buy-in and ensure that your outcomes are sustainable over time. It builds capacity for your work by cultivating leadership from within the community. And it inspires the passionate community pride that is the basis for any revitalization effort.

Community engagement is critical for dealing with inequity and injustice. Without decision-making power, those most marginalized in your community are least likely to experience the benefits of community improvements. Worse, they may fall victim to gentrification and displacement. Engagement efforts must open dialogues with previously marginalized groups in ways that feel meaningful and safe for them.

Breaking down old barriers and inviting new voices can be daunting. It's especially scary if weaving consensus has been challenging in the past. You may wonder how, if you open the door to input, you will ever get to action. This guide provides you with tools to navigate community engagement thoughtfully, productively, and joyfully. Along the way, you'll not only develop a vision to revitalize your community; you'll also cultivate inclusive community connections and pride of place.

WHEN TO USE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This guide starts at the beginning of the Main Street process, when you are forming your community's vision and building a coalition to support it. However, even if you are farther along in your revitalization, you'll find powerful resources within to deepen your engagement efforts and build community.

A comprehensive community engagement process is not effective for every decision. Below are guidelines to help you determine what sort of engagement is appropriate for your goals.

Community engagement is called for when at least one of these is true:

- /// You are in the process of developing Transformation Strategies to guide your revitalization work.



- /// There is a strongly-felt need in the community for action.
- /// Collective intelligence is called for.
- /// You need big-picture thinking. Who are we, what's important, where do we want to go, and how do we get there?
- /// There are constituencies in the community that have not been engaged in past processes or are being hurt by past efforts.
- /// There is a common goal/project/plan but various groups are working in silos to achieve it.

Sample community engagement questions:

- /// What's most important to us?
- /// What are your downtown's greatest assets?
- /// How can we preserve and promote our unique culture?
- /// How do we encourage the next generation to stay in our town?
- /// What is needed to revitalize our local economy?

Broad community engagement is not effective when:

- /// You need granular thinking, with decisions about details.
- /// Engagement would be a political tool to support a direction that has already been determined.
- /// A decision must be made quickly.
- /// There isn't energy around making change.

In these cases, you may turn to select community members, trusted advisors, or an elected board or committee for input and decision-making. Or, if there isn't energy around making change, you may reevaluate your assumptions about what's needed or spend time fostering one-on-one connections to build a coalition.

THE FOUR STEPS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

MAP

ENGAGE

CELEBRATE

EVALUATE

STEP ONE: **MAP**

“Involve Everyone.”

—Community Heart & Soul®, Orton Family Foundation

RESOURCES:

[Community Heart & Soul “Community Network Analysis Tool”](#)

[Community Heart & Soul “Many Perspectives From Different Voices”](#)

Serious community engagement starts with identifying key stakeholders through in-depth community mapping. Unless you know who the diverse groups in your community are and how to reach them, your process will be hampered by STP Syndrome: the Same Ten People making all the decisions and doing all the work.

Community mapping not only brings people into the planning part of your process; it also provides you with a metric against which to measure your process throughout. Once you have your community map, you’ll use it in every step of your process. Through visioning, decision-making, and implementation, you’ll refer to the map to ensure that your full demographic is being engaged and your revitalization efforts benefit all. Mapping allows you to form a coalition towards a common goal, with partners that become powerful allies in continuing to promote and celebrate the work at hand.

WHO ARE YOUR STAKEHOLDERS?

Every community will have a different set of key stakeholders. Those stakeholders will change, grow, and evolve over time depending on where you are in the revitalization process and what kind of partnerships your Transformation Strategies require. Common Main Street stakeholders include: business owners, universities, faith-based organizations, chambers of commerce, hospitals, recreational groups, arts councils, tourism board, local manufacturers, municipal staff, elected officials, and more.

COMMUNITY NETWORK ANALYSIS

/// **Know your demographic.** Use demographic data to create a community profile of who lives and works in your community. Identify groups and individuals who will affect or be affected by the project. Local knowledge and data should be combined with socioeconomic and population data to ensure full community participation, particularly by groups that present a greater challenge to reach or might be a minority in terms of religion, race, class, education, income, or age. Be sure to invite those who might oppose or stand in the way of the project and those who can offer new insights and perspectives. Don’t forget to engage your youth!

/// **Identify community networks.** Identify formal and informal groups and where in the community those groups regularly gather. Networks are ways and places that people organize and connect with each other. Networks can be formal—clubs, churches, etc.—or informal—such as laundromats and coffee houses.

/// **Find network connectors.** List key individuals seen as trusted members of different networks in your community. Connectors are people who are trusted by others to provide sound counsel, useful information, and help link people to each other. Connectors can provide insights into the community, be core project team members, or help spread the word about your work. Where you don’t have direct connections to certain target demographics, you may need to knock on doors, make phone calls, and build relationships to find connectors within them.

/// **Identify communication opportunities.** Learn where and through which channels your networks share and receive information. What are the gathering places, activities, and news sources that each network uses?

/// **Identify engagement opportunities.** Brainstorm ways to reach each network of people where they are and in formats that feel comfortable to them.

Credit: Community Heart & Soul, Orton Family Foundation

STEP TWO: **ENGAGE**

PART I: MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

RESOURCES:

[Community Heart & Soul Public Engagement Methods](#)

Most community engagement processes begin and end with large-group meetings. Meetings are by their nature exclusive, shutting out anyone who can't attend at the scheduled time or who are not comfortable in large-group settings because of language barriers or communication styles. There is a place for community meetings—especially when it's time to make decisions. In the “Inspired Community Meetings” section (page 9), you'll find creative ways to ditch the PowerPoint and harvest the wisdom of your community towards action.

But other forms of engagement can be more powerful than meetings. Meeting people where they are is a respectful and inclusive way to listen and unearth what is important. It allows you to build relationships and celebrate the various cultures in your community. It also provides ways to engage your community that are playful and fun, which encourages participation in your revitalization efforts!

To start engaging people where they are, use your community map to find key gathering places and identify effective ways to communicate with different groups. Then get inspired about engaging joyfully! Get your local arts groups, schools, and senior centers involved. The possibilities are endless; what follows are ideas to get you started.

STORY COLLECTING

RESOURCES:

[Community Heart & Soul “Using Storytelling in Heart and Soul”](#)

[Oral History Metadata Synchronizer](#)

[StoryCorps Story Sharing App](#)

There is something special in every community, and to build a unified sense of pride, you have to find out what it is. What's the spark? Why do people care?

“No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

CREDIT: ERIC REAVES



Collecting stories allows you to celebrate the different voices in your community and find out what matters most. After you've collected stories—through whichever method you choose— you can ferret out the strongest themes and use them to shape your community's vision.

Here are some ideas for story collection that involve the full breadth of your community's constituents.

- Give disposable cameras to school children and ask them to take pictures of what they love most about their community. Showcase the photos on posters and banners throughout your town.
- Have places throughout the community where people can enter video booths and tell stories, in their own language, about what they love about their place. Create a video that can be screened and streamed widely throughout your town.
- Provide children with recording devices and ask them to interview their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, or neighbors.
- Partner with local theater artists to turn your interviews into a play, performed by professionals or by local residents.
- Phone-in memories (see HeartSpots call-out box on page 7).

STEP TWO: ENGAGE

IDEA GENERATION

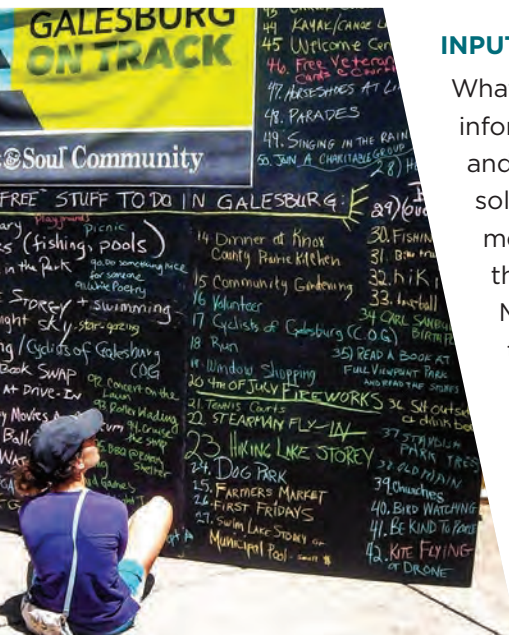
The best solutions for revitalizing a place come from the people who live there. Here is a story to inspire you to engage your community's creativity and skills.

RESOURCES:

Market Street Prototyping

Market Street in San Francisco had once been the civic spine of the community. When it fell into disrepair, local planners decided to hold a “Prototyping Festival,” with an open call for ideas about how to reactivate the street. They received over 200 submissions, with ideas for programming and entertainment, speaker series, bringing more nature into the city, and installations that sparked fun and joy.

The finalists were paired up with designers who created prototypes. The planners then held a design “science fair,” where the finalists displayed their prototypes on tables and presented their ideas to the public. Community members came to ask questions, and the community selected the winning entries. Each winner was awarded \$2500, and with help from partner agencies and designers, the finished products were installed on the street.



GALESBURG, ILLINOIS RESIDENTS WERE ASKED TO JOT DOWN FREE THINGS TO DO IN THE TOWN AND FILLED THIS BLACKBOARD WITH IDEAS. CREDIT: JAY REDFERN/THE REGISTER-MAIL

INPUT GATHERING

What if you need input to inform decision-making and priorities? Don't rely solely on community meetings (although see the Inspired Community Meetings section of this guide for better ways to do them). Get out on the street and ask people creatively.



PUTTING UP A “HEART SPOT” SIGN IN BIDDEFORD, MAINE. CREDIT: COMMUNITY HEART & SOUL

HeartSpots Memory Lane

As part of a Community Heart & Soul® project, Biddeford, Maine, residents were asked to celebrate their favorite parts of town. Dubbed HeartSpots Memory Lane, favorite places around town were designated with HeartSpot signs, and residents were invited to phone in and record their memories of the spot or a wish for the future.

Recordings were transcribed and then posted on an online HeartSpots map. This walk down memory lane not only offered the Community Heart & Soul Team a deeper understanding of Biddeford's most loved places; it also helped build community pride.

HeartSpots stories were a reminder of Biddeford's past strengths and its potential for success.

—From Community Heart & Soul

- █ **Community graffiti wall.** Post your question on giant chalkboard surfaces and leave space for people to record their answers. Be sure to record these permanently before they disappear!
- █ **Poll creatively.** Rather than a standard survey, put a simple question drink coasters at local restaurants and bars, with space for people to fill in their answers.
- █ **Poll colorfully.** Have people of all ages “vote” on options by placing jellybeans in glass jars.
- █ **Throw a mixer.** Ask attendees to fill out a short survey to get free drinks, food, or prizes before they enter the space.

STEP TWO: **ENGAGE**

PART II: INSPIRED COMMUNITY MEETINGS

“Change happens only at the speed of trust.”

–Stephen Covey

Sometimes the best way to engage your community is to bring everyone into one room. If there are decisions that need to be made or issues that require dialogue between different groups, nothing can replace having everyone together at the same time.

Since they are sometimes viewed as a necessary evil, community meetings are often structured to prevent the bad rather than to invite the good, with “experts” presenting on pre-determined options and an audience providing feedback in a limited and highly regulated format.

Inspired Community Meetings work on the principle that everyone in the room has the wisdom and creativity to solve the community’s greatest challenges. The meetings have a structure that encourages passionate participation, prevents hostile takeover, and honors disagreement. They are energizing and build excitement for a collective effort.

These are the key elements of Inspired Community Meetings:

- // Elimination of barriers to participation
- // Welcoming setting
- // Creative activities that encourage passion, problem-solving, and listening
- // Recorded results and actionable plans for how to use them

ELIMINATE BARRIERS

Your Inspired Community Meeting begins before anyone enters the room. Once you’ve created your community map and understand who is in your community and what communication is most effective for inviting them, it’s important to remove barriers to them showing up.

Here are ways to alleviate common barriers to participation:

- // Provide child care.
- // Provide food.
- // Have multiple convening at different times of different days of the week.



BALLE. CREDIT: TECHBOGGLE MEDIA

- // Don’t rely solely on digital promotion or sign-up. Not everyone is online.
- // Organize ride shares or other forms of transportation. Provide gas or bus vouchers. Locate the meeting somewhere easily accessible by walking, parking, and public transportation.
- // Provide language interpreters.
- // Make your meeting fun. If word of mouth is that your meetings are enjoyable, you’ll get more people the next time.
- // Locate the meeting in a place where participants feel welcome and safe, that is neutral in terms of politics and factions, is quiet, and is pleasant space to spend a couple hours.

WELCOMING SETTING

The setting gives people an immediate indication of whether they are there to listen or participate, whether the meeting will be boring or interesting, and whether it will be safe or contentious.

Provide a setting for your meeting as if you were throwing a warm gathering in your living room at home. A welcoming setting includes:

- // Plenty of light.
- // Good acoustics. Don’t hold a community meeting at a bar or restaurant.
- // Reflections of your community. Display pictures of your town or art from local school children that relates to the topic at end.

STEP TWO: ENGAGE

- Welcoming touches. If there are tables, use tablecloths. Put out flowers. Light candles. Play soft music when people enter.

- Plenty of wall space for working with and displaying flip charts.

- Snacks and beverages.

As you'll see in activities that follow, you can immediately disrupt the mentality of "Us vs. Them" by how you arrange your seating. ***Chairs in rows are not conducive to conversation!***

INSPIRING ACTIVITIES

The tools described below—Circle, World Cafe, Open Space, and Collective Story Harvesting—are from The Art of Hosting. There is a plethora of information online about each of them. Note that in each practice, the group—not the facilitators or "experts"—has the responsibility and the creativity to shape the outcome.

RESOURCES:

[The Art of Hosting](#)

CIRCLE

"What would have been the point of encouraging people to talk if you weren't going to talk about the tough issues, the hard things? This is what people long for and need."

-Connie Owens, Harlan County, Kentucky

RESOURCES:

[The Circle Way: A Leader In Every Chair, by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea](#)

[Art of Hosting: Circle](#)

- Good for reflecting on a question together
- Helps with practicing deep and active listening
- Helps to ensure all voices are included and heard
- Powerful for meeting openings and closings

One of the most powerful ways to signal that you are not having a typical community meeting is to set the chairs in a circle, with no tables. When chairs are in rows, with "experts" addressing an "audience," you have created a power dynamic for dissent and disengagement. A circle puts everyone on the same footing in terms of expertise and responsibility. Connecting with the faces of others encourages listening in those who are normally inclined to dominate a room and speaking in those who are normally inclined to be silent. A circle also creates a space that feels purposeful and respectful.

When the hardest of conversations need to happen, try putting the group in a circle and see if the conversation is richer and more productive.



CREDIT: ODN CHICAGO

STEP TWO: **ENGAGE**

WORLD CAFÉ

RESOURCES:

[The World Café Community Foundation](#)

- Helps find solutions that work for the community as a whole.
- Develops a shared language within the community.
- Surfaces knowledge from the whole room.



CREDIT: BALLE

World Café got its name because it imitates a café setting where small groups are all conversing together around tables. In this case, a cluster of small groups—anywhere from 10 to 1000—are in conversation about an issue that matters to them or some work they are trying to do together. After the first conversation, someone stays at the table as “host,” while the others move to new tables, taking their previous conversations with them. In this way, the threads of the various conversations are woven together and all get a sense of what is being discovered and developed between them.

Credit: ArtofHosting.org

Sometimes in World Café, there is a different, pre-determined question asked at each table. Participants choose to sit at the tables with the topics of the greatest interest to them. With several rounds, they can choose a number of different topics to discuss.

OPEN SPACE

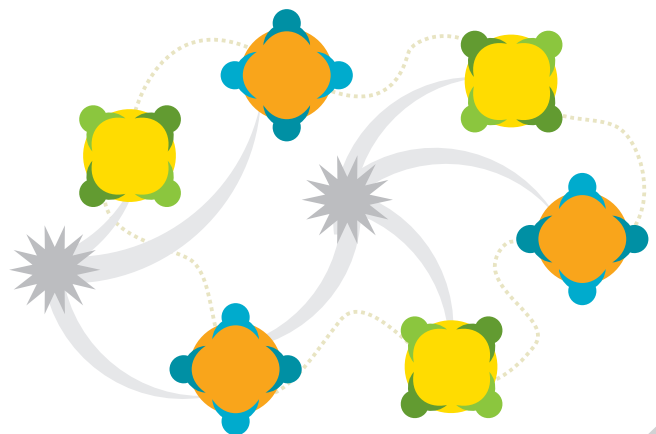
RESOURCES:

[Open Space World](#)

- A place to start when you have no idea what the solutions might be, when you're stuck as a group, and when there is a diversity of questions in the room.
- Organizes work and gets people to take responsibility for moving it forward.
- Reveals which issues people care about most.

With Open Space, you call a meeting around a core question. It could be, “What are the most important steps to revitalize our commercial district?” Each person who has a topic they'd like to raise under that core question announces it to the room. A facilitator records the questions and consolidates topics if there is overlap. The questions are written on big pieces of paper and posted throughout the room. Whoever posed the question stays with “their” paper and records the input. Other participants choose which discussion they want to join. You can have multiple “rounds” of open space so that participants can join different discussions. Each round should be at least 20 minutes long.

Open Space is governed by the “Law of Two Feet.” This means that everyone has the power to join discussions that are meaningful to them and to walk away from the ones that aren't. Lack of participation indicates that there isn't sufficient interest in pursuing that topic. It's OK to let a topic drop or to prioritize others for now. Open Space is a great way to see where there is and isn't energy in a room to tackle specific issues.



STEP TWO: **ENGAGE**

COLLECTIVE STORY HARVEST

RESOURCES:

[Collective Story Harvest by Amanda Fenton](#)

- // Good for learning from what has already happened and for keeping history relevant.
- // Brings simplicity to complex issues.
- // Gives a human face to the work at hand.
- // Although the focus is on one person, it gives everyone important tasks.
- // Promotes deep listening.

In Collective Story Harvest, people who have been directly impacted by the issue being discussed are invited to tell a relevant story about their work or lives. The key elements of the story are “harvested” by others in the room, leading to shared insights and deep connections.



RECORD AND SHARE PRODUCTIVELY

RESOURCES:

[The Benefits of Using Graphic Recording](#)

So you’ve harvested all sorts of ideas at your meeting. How do you present them to the group and showcase them publicly when the meeting is over?

FIVE WAYS TO MAKE COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE VISIBLE

- // **Use a Graphic Recorder.** At some meetings, the whole group conversation is captured by a graphic recorder who draws the group’s ideas on flip charts or a wall mural using text and graphics to illustrate the patterns of the conversation.
- // **Take a Gallery Tour.** If you’re using World Café, you can place the paper tablecloths from their tables on the wall so members can take a tour of each group’s ideas during a break.
- // **Post Your Insights.** Participants can place large Post-its with a single key insight on each on a blackboard, wall, etc. so that everyone can review the ideas at the end or during a break.
- // **Create Idea Clusters.** Group Post-its into “affinity clusters” so that related ideas are visible and available for planning the group’s next steps.

- // **Make a Story.** After your meeting, you can create a newspaper or storybook to bring the results of their work to larger audiences after the event, using graphic recordings along with text as documentation.

Credit: The World Café Community Foundation

CREDIT: NATIONAL MAIN STREET CENTER

STEP THREE: CELEBRATE

Your community map will provide you with an excellent communications plan for engagement; don't forget to also use it to promote and celebrate your accomplishments!

Doing an in-depth community engagement process is something to be proud of. Tell stories of the process and results internally to all involved throughout the process and externally to other partners, media, and the community at large. Encourage all the engagement partners and stakeholders to communicate their own stories of how they were a part of shaping their community. Celebrate milestones along the way.

If you've collected stories, throw a community-wide event to share and honor them. If you've created artwork or videos in your "Meet People Where They Are" efforts or have table drawings or priorities developed in your "Inspired Community Meetings" efforts, be sure to display them publicly and centrally. This will not only build excitement for your project; it will build trust by conveying transparency.

For ongoing partner collaboration and celebrating the work of the process, ask the participants how they might like to have further engagement. Could an online blog or social media group be formed where participants can further engage in the process?

Celebrate your efforts and thank your participants at every stage. Give awards to volunteers, participants, and local elected officials. And if your formal engagement efforts are coming to an end, throwing a party will help the excitement and connections to continue.

HIGHER GROUND THEATER

"Storytelling and music have always been poor people's arts."

-Robert Gipe, Harlan County, Kentucky

In Harlan County, Kentucky, a key part of community revitalization was combating prescription drug addiction. Using the local community college as a resource, they conducted oral histories of their residents. Local theater professionals worked with non-artists to turn the stories into a full-blown musical production.

A cast of 80 residents volunteered to be in the show, encompassing the community's full diversity of age, culture, ethnicity, geography, and economics. The cast included current and former addicts. While they were in rehearsal and production, cast members were provided with gas money and child care to reduce barriers to participation. Within the cast, and within the audiences, were groups of people who had never come together before to discuss the community's problems and work towards solutions and a shared vision.

CREDIT: ERIC REAVES



STEP FOUR: EVALUATE

RESOURCES:

[Community Heart & Soul Demographic Tracking Tool](#)

Your guide to evaluating your community engagement efforts will be the community map you created in Step One. At every phase of your engagement process, through visioning, decision-making, and implementation, you will compare who participated with your map of who is in your community. Each phase is an opportunity for you to alter your course if a constituency is being left out. “We invited them but they didn’t come” is really not OK; keep digging to erase the barriers to participation.

You can also build ongoing evaluation into the process from the beginning by including feedback tools for your participants. You can provide surveys at the end of meetings and events so participants can give feedback anonymously, with questions such as:

- // Did you feel welcome and comfortable contributing at today’s event?
- // What we did we do collectively that we can move forward on?
- // How do you intend to stay engaged? What is your role in moving the work forward?
- // What worked for you today? What didn’t work for you today?
- // Are there other people or groups who weren’t here whom you think should be part of this process?

The results of your evaluation should be part of your regular communication and celebration back to your community. You promised them deep community engagement; be sure that you let them know throughout the process that you’re keeping that promise.

CONVENING VIRTUALLY

This resource guide focuses almost exclusively on activities that bring people together physically because in-person engagement remains the most inclusive way to create engagement, excitement, and consensus. However, sometimes convening virtually is desirable. Here’s a tool to help you determine whether virtual convening would be effective.

CONDITIONS FOR CONVENING VIRTUALLY:

...Participants have at least moderate comfort with socializing online

...And they all have sufficient connectivity for easy participation

...And there are too many people to gather in person

...And the urgency is high enough that organizing an in-person meeting would take too long

...And there are participant availability issues, they lack resources, or there are some other hard constraints that prevent meeting in person

*From “Gather: The Art and Science of Effective Convening”
by the Monitor Institute and The Rockefeller Foundation*

Below is an assortment of tools for convening virtually. Their inclusion here is not an endorsement but rather a sampling of the types of tools that are available.

Budget Simulator. Simulates a community budget and lets community members see the outcomes of different budgeting solutions.

Dialogue. Anyone in the community can set a challenge, and then anyone can propose solutions. Includes a forum to discuss and rate the suggestions.

E-Democracy. Provides a neighborhood-based forum to support participation in public life.

EngagementHQ. Integrates tools for mapping, surveys, idea sharing and voting, and contact list management.

Loomio. Provides a framework for discussion, proposals, and decision-making, plus setting goals and tracking outcomes.

Hylo. Supports community teams tasked with implementation of revitalization efforts through project management and communication tools.

Survey Monkey and **Google Forms.** Easy survey platforms for input and idea generation.

CONCLUSION

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don't know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by differences you hear.

Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

-Margaret Wheatley

Those in the Main Street movement are geared to action. When elected officials, boards, funders, and members want immediate results, it's tempting to view community engagement as a roadblock to progress. If you want to do something good for your community, why stall the process by opening a proverbial can of worms?

Here's the problem: without deep community buy-in and ownership, revitalization is a house of cards. Yes, you could restore a beautiful downtown, with historic buildings, greenery, and local businesses. But if the community doesn't feel a relationship with those business owners, why will it support those businesses over big box stores or online stores? If the new Main Street doesn't reflect the diverse cultures in your community, who will be left out—or priced out—of the opportunities you create? And if you skip engagement because your community seems too divisive or disjointed to come to

consensus, how will you build the relationships that are essential to your community's viable future?

Effective community engagement allows an inclusive vision to emerge, but that's not all. The very process of convening deeply and well can transform a neighborhood or town and its citizens, overcoming old barriers and creating a passionate, unified team, strengthened by the diversity of its cultures and opinions, and emboldened with new skills it can use to meet future challenges and reach future goals. Deep community engagement is not an ordeal to endure; rather it is a rewarding opportunity not to be missed!

We hope that this guide has given you the resources you need to host creative, inspiring, and inclusive conversations that will allow your community to discover what it cares about.



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TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY COMMUNITY SURVEY

When you are in the process of selecting Transformation Strategies for your district, online surveys are an effective way of gauging community perceptions, interest, and priorities. Sample survey questions include:

.....

What three words come to mind when you think about downtown XYZ? (please limit to one word answer)

Downtown XYZ would be better if...

Which businesses do you most often patronize in downtown XYZ?

What 3 business types would you like to see with the downtown/district that are not currently present?

What time of day do you typically shop?

- 7-9am
- 9-11am
- 11am - 1pm
- 1-5pm
- After 5pm

What day of the week do you most frequently shop?

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday

Where do you live

- In downtown XYZ
- Elsewhere in XYZ
- Elsewhere in X county
- Outside X county

Would you live in the downtown/district if you could?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Already live in district
- If not, why? _____

Where do you work?

- In downtown XYZ
- Elsewhere in XYZ
- Elsewhere in X county
- Outside of X county
- I work at home
- I'm a student
- I'm retired
- I'm unemployed
- I'm unable to work

How old are you?

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-75
- 75 or over
- Prefer not to answer

“Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.”

-Margaret Wheatley

RESOURCES

Community Engagement, General

[Bright Spots in Community Engagement](#) by Knight Foundation and the National League of Cities

[Center for Economic and Community Development](#) at Penn State

[Community Heart & Soul Field Guide](#)

[Gather: The Art and Science of Effective Convening](#) by The Rockefeller Foundation and Monitor Institute

[Radical Inclusion](#) by Community Allies

[Turning To One Another](#) by Margaret Wheatley

Map

[Community Heart & Soul “Many Perspectives From Different Voices”](#)

[Community Heart & Soul Community Network Analysis](#)

Meet People Where They Are

[Community Heart & Soul Public Engagement Methods](#)

[Community Heart & Soul “Using Storytelling in Heart and Soul”](#)

[The Arts, Youth and Police: Civic Dialogue in Richmond, Virginia](#)

[Before I Die](#)

[Higher Ground](#)

[Market Street Prototyping](#)

[9 Ways to Get Public Input: Thinking Beyond the Survey](#)

[Oral History Metadata Synchronizer](#)

[StoryCorps Story Sharing App](#)

[Voices of Golden](#)

Inspired Community Meetings

[The Art of Hosting](#)

[The Art of Hosting: Circle](#)

[The Art of Powerful Questions](#)

[The Circle Way: A Leader In Every Chair](#) by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea

[The Benefits of Using Graphic Recording/Graphic Facilitation](#) by Susan Kelly

[Collective Story Harvest](#) by Amanda Fenton

[Open Space World](#)

[Planning for Complexity](#) by Chris Corrigan

[World Café](#)

[World Café Tool Kit](#)

Evaluate

[Community Heart & Soul Demographic Tracking Tool](#)

Training

[Art of Hosting](#)

[Sojourn Theater Summer Institute for Arts-Based Community-Led Transformation](#)

[Institute of Cultural Affairs](#)