COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

Community Engagement
Lessons from the Pandemic
What should we keep in our toolkit?

Covid-19 changed the ways government agencies and non-profit organizations engaged with community members on new projects, proposals, and policies. We learned to maintain physical distance and interact via video platforms. Whenever possible, we took community meetings outdoors and learned to connect with people through surveys, screens, and storefront displays.

As vaccinations become more widespread and the virus begins to recede, more conventional methods of community engagement are likely to return. But some of the discoveries made during the pandemic are valuable, and on-going innovation can help to expand and deepen public participation, even when it is safe to gather again in large groups indoors.

This toolkit captures some of the innovative engagement practices that emerged during the pandemic. It is not comprehensive, as new techniques for community engagement are being developed all the time. Instead, the toolkit aims to represent a variety of practices that can be adapted to address community needs and local conditions.

Community Engagement
Lessons from the Pandemic
Case Studies

This toolkit includes US and international examples of innovative community engagement efforts that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of these case studies were based on interviews with project leaders and facilitators, followed by a high-level survey of other engagement efforts based on information gleaned from project websites.

Where possible, case studies include links to engagement tools developed for specific projects.

MOAKLEY PARK Boston, Massachusetts
STOSS Landscape Urbanism

"When a single space performs so many functions for so many people, how do we craft an effective engagement strategy? Continuous and sustained communication, through a variety of programs and formats, has so far proven to be the key to success. Prior to COVID-19 and the need for social distancing, the foundation of our engagement strategy was community open houses and on-site events, including Discover Moakley!, a day-long community event organized to bring fun and energy to the park with local vendors, an activated street, and booths for community input and resiliency education. We amplified these efforts with digital and physical surveys, one-on-one interviews, and mapping activities; these allowed us to initiate conversations with community members about how the park is used, and to better understand their hopes and dreams for the future of the park.

Throughout the process, we tested a number of new tools. For Discover Moakley!, we facilitated an interactive activity in which participants poured water over different surfaces to see the rate of water infiltration, creating a demonstration of green infrastructure principles and porous pavement in action. In partnership with Boston Parks and Recreation, we developed a Moakley Park coloring book which we disseminated through social media, creating an opportunity for younger park users to participate."

Text + images: STOSS LANDSCAPE URBANISM

BEFORE PANDEMIC
- Open houses and on-site events

PANDEMIC TOOLS
- ZOOM meetings + surveys
- Google Forms
- Live polling through Sli.do; integration between Sli.do and ZOOM was key
- Google Jamboards for collaboration
- Outdoor cleanups with pandemic protocols for in-person connection
- YouTube videos (available on the project website) were used to share meetings and connect with the larger community
- Coloring pages for youth engagement

STRUGGLES
- Some community members still wanted in-person gatherings; distanced cleanups provided an opportunity to bring people together.

SUCCESSES
- The challenges of the pandemic led to better outreach practices, especially for those traditionally left out of typical processes.
- Planning ahead is key for using survey tools.

GARFIELD COMMUNITY PLAN Toledo, Ohio
Toledo Design Collective

"Garfield is comprised of businesses, housing, social services, educational institutions, and new development along the Maumee River. This planning process engaged Garfield residents and stakeholders to create a vision for the area and promote sustainable and equitable change.

At the end of July 2020, East Toledo Family Center and One Voice for East Toledo, in partnership with Toledo Design Collective and Midstory, launched the process for a comprehensive community plan in the Garfield Neighborhood. This plan provides a vision for how residents want to develop to meet future demands while preserving what makes the neighborhood unique."

Text + images: TOLEDO DESIGN COLLECTIVE
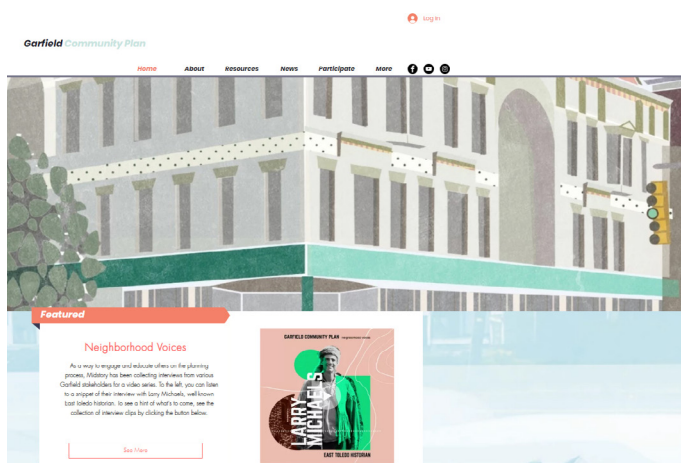
BEFORE PANDEMIC
- Engagement strategy consisted of several rounds of community meetings and in-person workshops, all of which was put in pause during the pandemic.

PANDEMIC TOOLS
- Physical drop boxes where residents could return completed surveys. Surveys could also be completed at local businesses. There were over 200 responses from targeted population.
- Toledo Design Collective created short videos, available on the project website, to explain pieces of the project.
- www.polleverywhere.com (integration with ZOOM was key)
- Full social-media strategy for outreach
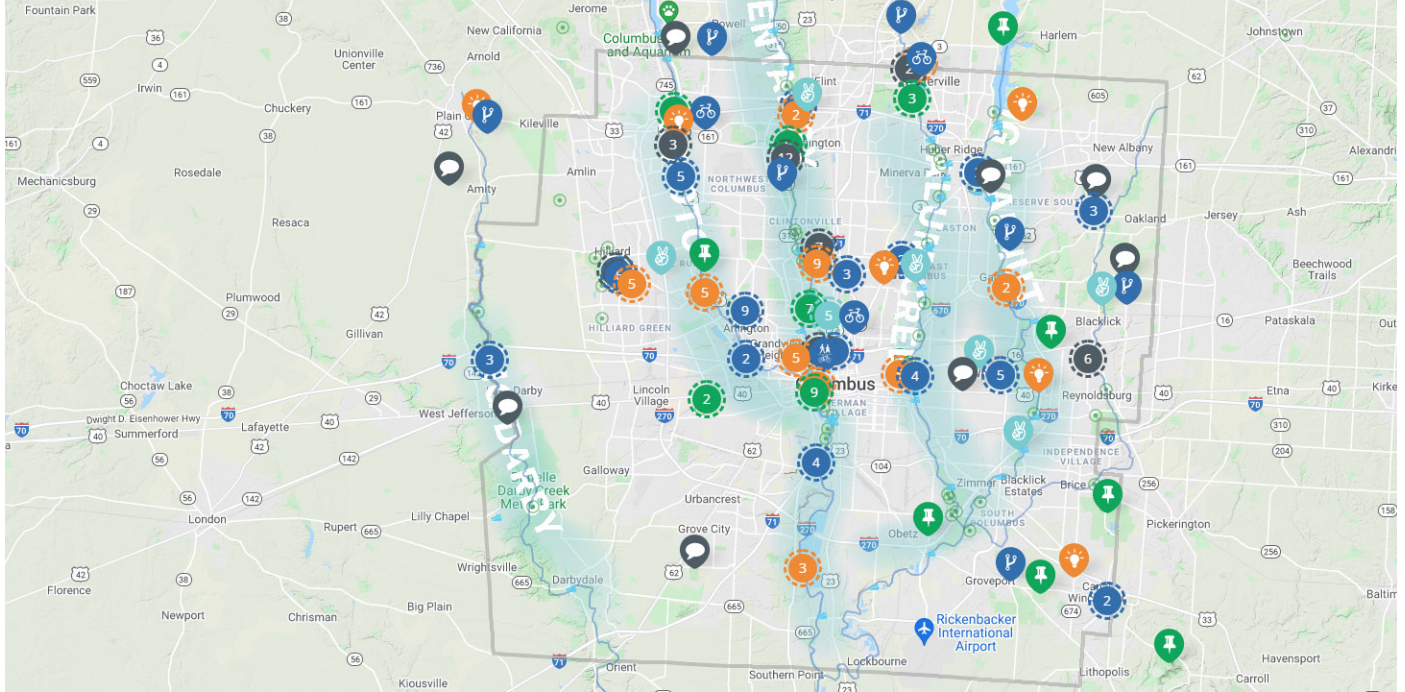- www.annotate.net (white board)

STRUGGLES
- Digital access divide
- Digital engagement burn-out

SUCCESSES
- Videos and project-specific website/social media strategy were important.
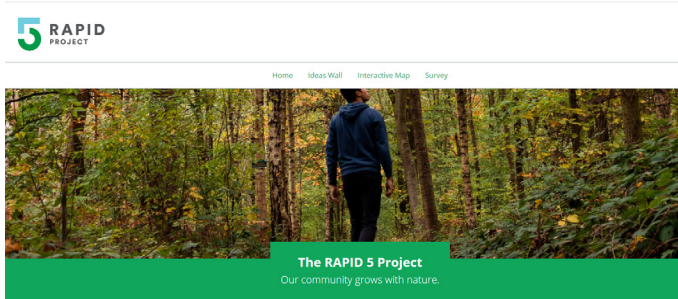
THE RAPID 5 PROJECT Columbus, Ohio
Columbus Neighborhood Design Center

"RAPID 5 is a unique opportunity to create a shared vision for an integrated open space network to benefit our economy, manage growth, provide access for recreation, education, and health; preserve natural resources and environmental health.

This vision will create a cohesive plan for the improvement and development of the publicly owned land along the five riparian corridors in Franklin County. This plan is intended to be much more than a parks or green space master plan. It is a vision to reframe the connectivity of the region based on the natural geography defined by our waterways; to connect all Franklin County residents to the region's natural resources, cultural, and economic resources for recreation, commuting, commerce, education, and relaxation."

Text + images: RAPID 5 INITIATIVE

BEFORE PANDEMIC
- In-person meetings had been scheduled.

PANDEMIC TOOLS
- Physical ballot boxes to drop off surveys
- Project-specific website: rapid5.mysocialpinpoint.com
- Posters in high-traffic areas of trails
- Surveys were dropped off at YMCA's/Libraries/ recreation centers.
- Social Pinpoint for community input: www.socialpinpoint.com
- To reach children and their parents in the school system: ms.peachjar.com

STRUGGLES
- Surveys meant to address the digital divide did not have a good return rate.

SUCCESSES
- The project-specific website was well-used and helped to keep residents engaged and informed.
- Social Pinpoint—a full service engagement platform that includes maps, ideas wall, etc.

E. 66 STREET HOUGH - TLCI Cleveland, Ohio
MIDTOWN CLEVELAND, LEXY LATTIMORE & DANIEL GRAY-KONTAR

"Community partners, residents, and the City of Cleveland are working to improve the E. 66th Street corridor through the Transportation for Livable Communities Initiative from the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency.

E. 66th Street is a significant street in the Hough neighborhood. Institutions and businesses in this corridor have served the community for many years. With its roots as an old trolley line, it makes sense that E. 66th Street is an important transportation corridor.

Exciting things are happening on E. 66th Street. The Cleveland Foundation is moving its headquarters from downtown to E. 66th Street and Euclid Avenue. The Hough branch of the Cleveland Public Library will move to Lexington and E. 66th Street, and various organizations and residents are continuing to move into the neighborhood."

Text + Images: MIDTOWN CLEVELAND

BEFORE PANDEMIC
- National Endowment for the Arts support for local artists to lead the community engagement process.
- The pandemic changed existing models of arts-driven planning.

PANDEMIC TOOLS
- Online youth council developed for the project became an autonomous, on-going organization.
- Local artists led online meetings and produced dance engagements.
- A tech-savvy community leader went door-to-door bringing internet to people who did not have it; Verizon provided equipment.

STRUGGLES
- The digital divide was difficult to overcome. It took one-on-one training to get residents of all ages comfortable with ZOOM.

SUCCESSES
- Arts-driven planning (dance and youth council).
- Targeted efforts to bridge digital divide.

ASIATOWN SWEETHEART Cleveland, Ohio
Midtown Cleveland

"AsiaTown Sweetheart, a COVID-19 community response project, was initiated by AsiaTown Cleveland residents to spread love and hope by making and delivering care packages of homemade desserts to neighbors. The story of "AsiaTown Sweetheart" begins with four AsiaTown residents losing their jobs because of COVID-19.

Four moms (Christy, Jojo, Winni, and Ying) in Cleveland's AsiaTown neighborhood decided to pursue new hobbies during Ohio's pandemic-related shutdown. They discovered a shared talent for baking. MidTown Cleveland AsiaTown Community Organizer, Xinyuan Cui learned about their baking on WeChat, a social media platform that is popular in the Chinese community. Cui contacted them to ask if they would share their baking talent with the community. This coincided with the start of the Neighbor-Up COVID-19 Rapid Response Grants from the Cleveland Foundation, a community fund to promote connectedness during the pandemic. The moms recognized the meaningfulness of sharing during this difficult time. Together with Karis Tzeng, Midtown Cleveland AsiaTown Project Manager, and Cui, they applied for and received grant funds."

Text + images: Xinyuan Cui, Case Western Reserve University

BEFORE PANDEMIC
- Program did not exist

PANDEMIC TOOLS
- WeChat.com (social media platform)
- Baking as a means of outreach through Feed Asiatown initiative.
- In-person and digital tools created an on-going platform for business development and community organizing.

STRUGGLES
- Network to sell baked goods had to be established

SUCCESSES
- Feed Asiatown helped create "Asiatown Sweetheart,"
- A network of Chinese-American women now have a sustainable business and are organizing public space efforts in Cleveland's Asiatown neighborhood

LA PERSE OUTDOOR EATING ENGAGEMENT Bogota, Columbia
Diseño Publico, collab-19

"Bogotá has been gravely affected by the pandemic. Not only has the city had one of the longest forced quarantines since the beginning of the pandemic, but it is a city where the vast majority of the population cannot work from home. La Perse is a temporary structure to support COVID-safe civic life during lockdown.

Collab-19 was asked to design an outdoor dining solution. The client (the city) essentially had no funds for the project. We realized that designing in the middle of a socioeconomic crisis asked us to think outside of traditional building materials given the shortage of plexiglass and plywood.

We concluded that the design had to be built with materials that were already part of our day-to-day routines, which could be recycled or reused to save costs. This led us to investigate construction infrastructure as inhabitable architecture. We decided that scaffolding was the most appropriate construction system due to its modularity, accessibility, and outdoor feel. The scaffolding was donated by manufacturer, Layher.

This is an unusual moment in recent history where public and private entities are desperately searching for fresh solutions to reactivate the economy, leading to an increased value in designers."

Text + images: COLLAB-19

BEFORE PANDEMIC
- Project was needed because of pandemic.

PANDEMIC TOOLS
- Creative design thinking in response to an urgent civic need. Scaffolding was readily available since few construction projects were moving forward during the pandemic. Also, scaffolding could be reused for other projects when the outdoor dining structure was no longer needed.
- Donated materials (scaffolding)

STRUGGLES
- Lack of funding
- Shortages of traditional building materials
- Lack of civic space during long lockdown

SUCCESSES
- Temporary architecture's role in creating a happier, healthier city

BESAYA DELIBERA EN EUROPA Besaya Region, Spain
Pez Estudio

"The Suances City Council called on community members to participate in the "Besaya delibera en Europa" project. This is a European pilot action coordinated by the Government of Cantabria, where the municipality of Suancino is located.

The main objective of the process is to select projects and proposals to implement in the Besaya basin, a model of sustainable development from the social, economic, and environmental points of view.

For this, a citizen jury was selected by lottery made up of 35 people from ten of the member municipalities. This group assesses proposals and issues a report of recommendations prioritizing the sectors to be supported, the measures to be adopted, and the projects to be promoted."

Text + images: EL FARADIO

BEFORE PANDEMIC
- Deliberative Democracy/Civic Lottery to select community representatives to meet in person

PANDEMIC TOOLS
- Rooms with computers and trainers helping council members with unfamiliar technology
- Facilitated Zoom + Miro board sessions
- Mailed packages with materials for review and discussion

STRUGGLES
- Less fluid conversations
- Older council members had difficulties with digital tools

SUCCESSES
- Higher active participation
- This deliberative process for land use and development decision making appears to be working. Citizen juries are providing objective, well-informed input into a wide range of projects.
- Education and accessibility to digital tools is broadening participation.

CEREBOS GARDENS London, UK
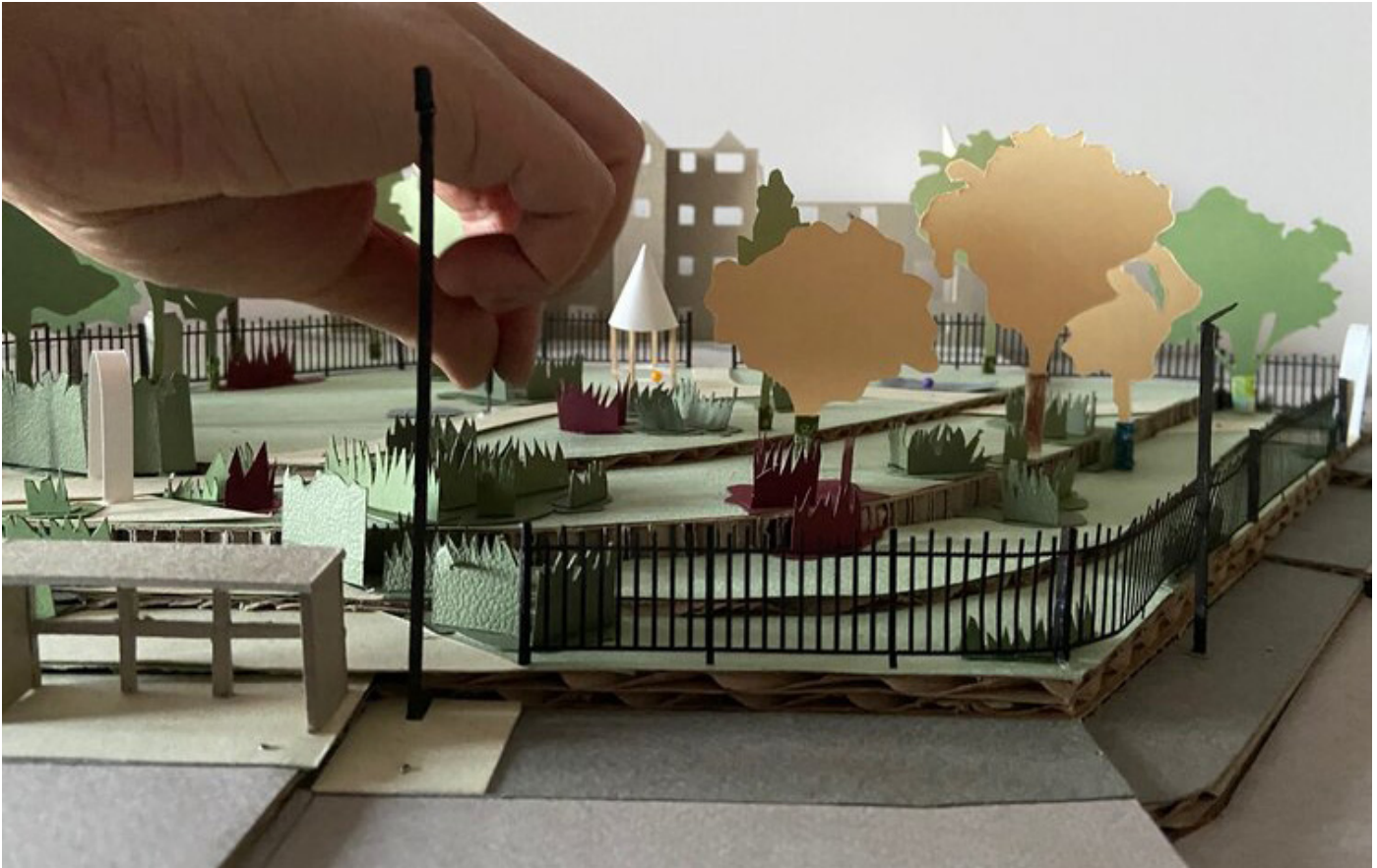
COMMUNITY LANDSCAPES - LONDON, UK

HAYATSU ARCHITECTS

OLD OAK & PARK ROYAL DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

CITY OF LONDON

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS
- Online Conversations
- Collective Model-Making

WEBSITE
- www.hayatsuarchitects.com/cerebos-gardens

"In partnership with the local community, Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC) is bringing forward plans revitalize three Cerebos Gardens pocket parks on Victoria Road in Old Oak, as part of our *In the Making* projects. OPDC, in partnership with local residents, jointly commissioned Hayatsu Architects and together created designs for the public outdoor space.

With open space being particularly important at the moment, and Cerebos Gardens being one of the only public green parks in the immediate vicinity, it was important to be able to continue the project during the lockdown period. We did this by holding online community co-design meetings and then presenting the plans to the Community Review Group (an advisory panel made up entirely of local residents) using video conference.

As Cerebos Gardens is OPDC's first community co-design project, we were delighted to receive such positive feedback from the Community Review Group and ensure that these collaborative, co-design discussions could continue despite lockdown."

Text + images: *In The Making* Cerebos Gardens Landscape Co-design

JOE LOUIS GREENWAY Detroit, Michigan
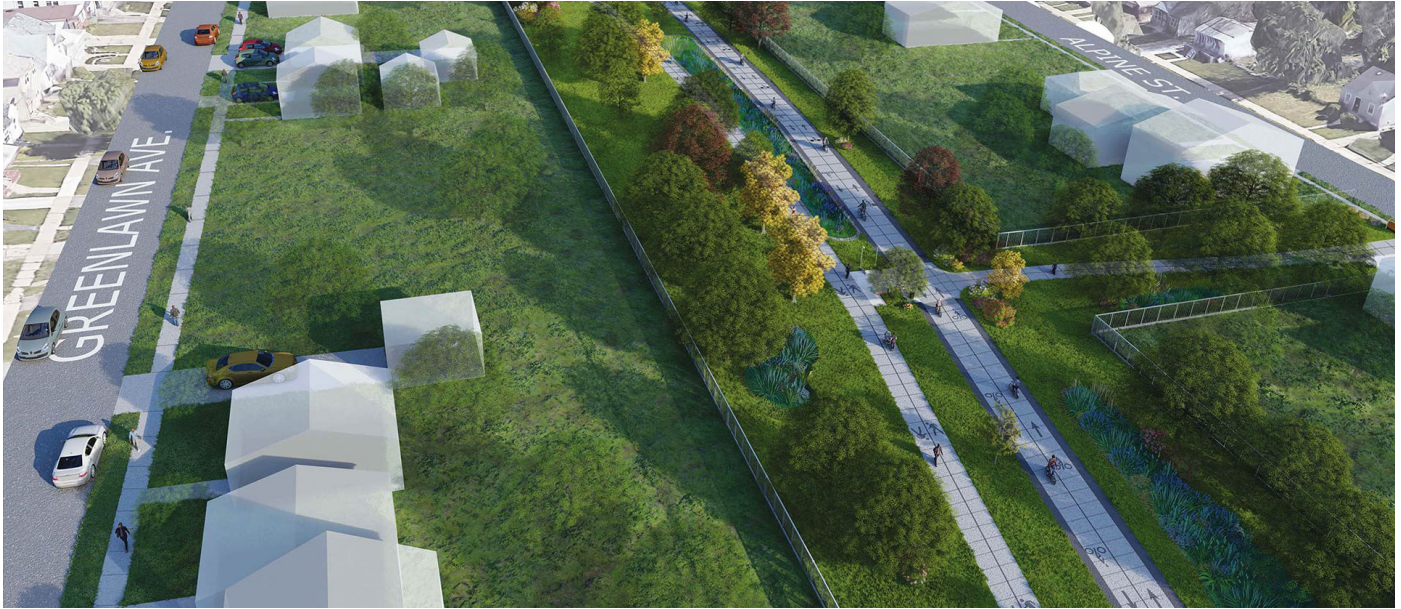
UNIFYING PATHWAY - DETROIT, MICHIGAN

SMITHGROUP

CITY OF DETROIT

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS
- Online conversations
- Citizen Advisory Council: Eight community members selected based on their advocacy in the community and deep connections to other residents, as well as their interest in non-motorized transportation and green space.
- Card Sorting Game: Small groups of participants each received a set of illustrated cards with themes relating to the environment, economic development, arts and culture, mobility, safety, health, programming, and other areas of interest. The group discussed the cards and arranged them into levels of importance. One member from each group then shared a summary of their discussion while a facilitator records key points.

WEBSITE
- detroitgreenways.org/projects/joe-louis-greenway

"Although Detroit's story has become one of the most iconic, the city is not alone in the scars it bears. Inflicted by centuries of discriminatory policies and pervasive racial injustices in our systems that persist today, these wounds run deep in our American cities. Now, more than ever, we see evidence of this across the nation, brought into sharper focus by the Black Lives Matter movement—with collective voices that are speaking out against violence and systemic injustice against people of color. As Detroit works to rebuild itself, it must do so with a dedicated focus on equity and racial justice, and a commitment to creating more inclusive social and physical infrastructure.

The planning and design of the Joe Louis Greenway strives to promote shared dialogue and community-driven authorship, with the hope that this process, and others like it, may begin to heal urban trauma and guide a more inclusive future. The 32-mile non-motorized trail connects communities within the cities of Detroit, Dearborn, Hamtramck, and Highland Park. It ambitiously repurposes vacant, abandoned, and contaminated railroad corridors, as well as oversized rights-of-way.

With this project, we use our capabilities as landscape architects to collaborate directly with the community through the design process: to amplify voices other than our own and build shared authorship, to listen and respond more thoughtfully, and to provide the tools that the community needs to have ownership of their greenway."

Text + images: SMITHGROUP and the American Society of Landscape Architects

OAKLAND SLOW STREETS Oakland, California

CORRIDOR EVALUATION & STREET CLOSURES OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

CITY OF OAKLAND

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS
- Online Conversations
- Surveys
- Collective Model-Making

WEBSITE
- www.oaklandca.gov/projects/oakland-slow-streets

The City of Oakland Slow Streets Program was launched in April 2020 as part of the City's Covid-19 response. It was intended to support safe physical activity and alleviate overcrowding in parks and on trails by discouraging through traffic on certain local streets. Oakland was one of the earliest adopters of the slow streets concept.

The first phase of the program was rolled out over three months. "Soft closure" barriers were installed to support the use of over 21 street miles throughout the city for physically distant walking, wheelchair rolling, jogging, and biking.

The second phase, Slow Streets: Essential Places, was launched in May 2020, which installed intersection improvements at 21 locations to support residents' safe access to essential services such as grocery stores, food distribution sites, and Covid-19 test sites.

Oakland Slow Streets was praised for its speedy implementation and for its goal of giving streets back to the people. It became an international model as a transportation-based pandemic response.

But not everyone liked the program. A few weeks into the project, a survey revealed that affluent, white and non-disabled residents overwhelmingly approved of the program. But people of color, people with lower incomes, and people with disabilities reported much lower levels of awareness, use and support. Local nonprofits criticized the city for its lack of community outreach and for not focusing on more urgent pandemic-related issues. Some felt that the street closures themselves sent a mixed message.

Existing corridors are being evaluated and context-specific changes based on feedback are being made. In recognition that Slow Streets are not working the same for every neighborhood, surveys were sent to every resident and business along each slow street corridor soliciting feedback on that specific corridor. The City is conducting outreach in specific corridors based on priority level as defined by the Geographic Equity Toolbox and maintenance needs as materials for upgrades become available. Based on the feedback, Slow Street signage and barricades will either be upgraded to more durable materials and other context specific changes made or the Slow Street will be removed.

Text + images: CITY OF OAKLAND DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Community Engagement
Lessons from the Pandemic
Moving Forward

Although these case studies reflect different places, cultures, and conditions, they share some key takeaways for community engagement during the pandemic and beyond:

HYBRIDITY Explore models for virtual and in-person engagement that occur simultaneously or at different times, but value participants equally, whether they are in the room or on a screen.

- Recognize that remote meetings may increase the number of participants, but the digital divide can preclude people with lower-incomes, people of color, elderly residents, and others from accessing video-conferencing and related technology.

- Find ways to track who is participating and shift your approach to boost outreach to segments of the population that haven't been engaged

- Consider having at least two facilitators, once to focus on participants in the room and another to focus on remote participants.

- Try different approaches to physical survey collection. Offering options may boost your return rate.

ACCESS Provide digital equipment, tools, and training so all community participants make their voices heard.

- Explore opportunities for partnerships with local Internet/tech providers (one of the case studies worked with Verizon).

- Consider providing individualized technical help through volunteers to ensure people are able to fully participate.

INTEGRATION There are many tools for community engagement and new ones are being developed all the time.

- Choose platforms and tools that are easy to use and work together seamlessly.

- Simplicity wins over more powerful tools because people don't get distracted!

- Always test your technology before using it with community participants.

DIGITAL CULTURES Know your audience. If community members are used to a particular platform or facilitation style, build on what works, rather than introducing something new.

GRATITUDE Community members are contributing their time and expertise, which can be stressful in times of uncertainty. Acknowledge the contributions of community participants with food (consider home delivery for virtual meetings) and compensation. Build these costs into your project budget from the beginning.

Some questions for further consideration include:

- **How can we manage the amount of time and energy we are asking of community members?** Combining several topics or projects into a single meeting can make more efficient use of people's time, provided that this does not lead to excessively long or confusing meetings. It may make more sense to combine because that's how people experience their neighborhoods and lives—integrated rather than divided by projects or specific topic areas. Paying community members a stipend to serve as project advisors is a good way to value people's time. Stipends can be built into a project budget from the beginning.

- **What are the most effective ways to involve artists into a community engagement process? How do you find artists who are interested in social practice?** It is useful to engage artists from the very beginning of a project and to be open to new ideas for engagement that may emerge from collaborating with artists. The easiest way to find artists to work with is by issuing a call through local arts organizations and by offering sufficient funding to support artist involvement. Again, these costs can be built into a project from the beginning. Local community foundations, statewide arts councils, and the National Endowment for the Arts are potential funding sources.

- **What's the most effective way to incorporate translation services in an interactive meeting?** While some video platforms (including ZOOM) offer simultaneous translation, the service can be expensive and not all languages are available. Hiring bilingual community members to serve as translators can be effective, since they understand the community context and can also answer questions and clarify issues after the meeting.

- **Is it better to have separate meetings for people who speak different languages? Or keep everyone together and translate meeting content verbally and on white boards?** This depends on the overall engagement process and the range of opportunities for community input. If meetings are the only platform for engagement, it may be best to offer separate meetings in different languages and at least one combined meeting with bilingual community residents as translators.

- **What's next?** That remains to be seen. But the flexible and creative community engagement strategies that emerged during the pandemic have laid the groundwork for on-going experimentation.

Acknowledgements

Safe Routes
PARTNERSHIP