



States manage significant funding that can support Safe Routes to Parks. As stewards of public funds, states have a responsibility to prioritize strong projects that reflect the needs and desires of the community they will affect. This factsheet lays out how states can use grant guides and project selection criteria to prioritize projects backed by meaningful community engagement.

PUBLIC SUPPORT: What Does It Mean, and Why Does It Matter?

Maybe you've heard stories of bike lanes being uninstalled after community backlash, or – on a happier note – construction of park improvements in a [community that self-organized](#) to advocate for their interests. The first is something to avoid, and the latter is something to celebrate. A key difference between them is public support. In this factsheet,

“public support,” means that the community has participated in shaping a project to meet their particular needs and, as a result, is bought into the process and final result. Projects that are backed with demonstrated local support and have an engaged group of stakeholders can be more successful at fulfilling community needs for the long term and can be ready to implement once they are funded rather than getting delayed by community pushback.

In the best-case scenario, public agencies invest in projects identified and elevated by members of the community – the taxpayers whose money is used to fund projects, and the intended beneficiaries determine the projects. What paths can state agencies create to facilitate hearing from and investing in community-identified priorities?

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: What Does it Mean, What Works, and What are Communities Already Doing?

Community engagement is the act of establishing the relationships and spaces to understand the context and needs of a group. It should be a mutually beneficial experience for both the party conducting it and the community that participates, building toward a longer-term, trusting relationship, rather than a short-term, transactional one. Engagement processes are characterized by asking questions and getting curious about people's experiences rather than coming in with pre-set solutions for people to give limited feedback on. This approach can make a big difference in how all parties relate to one another and produce tangible changes in communities that improve people's lives.



Photo Credit: Blue Zones Project Hawaii

Consider the engagement approaches that work to get meaningful involvement from communities across your state. One way to identify those approaches is to reach out to community leaders in places that have had successful projects in the past. Seek to understand how they engaged their communities before, during, and after their grant. Also, consider connecting with groups doing great community engagement work that may not have applied for your specific grant program. Ask them about their barriers to applying for funding programs in your state and how it would be easiest for them to demonstrate the work they are already doing. For general ideas on how to facilitate meaningful engagement for Safe Routes to Parks projects, read [A Checklist for Facilitating Community Engagement During Safe Routes to Parks Visioning Activities](#).

Understanding what works to gather community perspectives and build trust can help you select the information you need to identify strong future applicants and avoid adding additional requirements that don't add significant value to proposed projects. Think about the approach to community engagement that you want to encourage and support. Ideally, applicants will have the opportunity to show documentation (in a low-effort way) of the great work they are already doing to connect with community members to identify, refine, and prioritize projects.

ASSESSING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR PROJECTS: Actions for States (and other stewards of public funds)

To determine whether a project has public support, states and other stewards of public funds can include questions in funding applications to understand the authenticity and depth of public support and incentivize applications for projects with strong, demonstrated community buy-in. For information on other opportunities to incentivize Safe Routes to Parks actions more broadly beyond the application process, see this [state incentives factsheet](#).

- **Get Details About the Engagement**

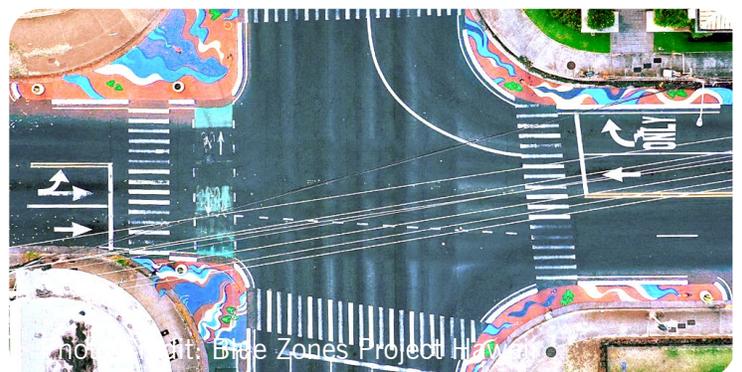
Process: Often, active transportation (and other) grant applications ask for a resolution from the local government in support of the program. While this is important, especially if a project will take place in the public right of way or on publicly-owned/managed land, it doesn't necessarily convey whether everyday residents support the project. To gauge that level of public support, applications can include questions about community engagement activities and how the resulting feedback and ideas shaped the proposed project.

- **Look Past the Polish to Identify Great Community Engagement Work:**

When prioritizing community-identified projects, it's critical to acknowledge that technical writing is not a common skill, especially if people are not paid to do it. Consider how you can set up applications to collect the information you need in ways that are easier for communities to let their work shine rather than prioritizing the traditionally "best written" grant application that may require a paid grant writer.

CALIFORNIA PARKS GRANTS PRIORITIZE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The California Department of Parks and Recreation runs the Statewide Park Development and Community Revitalization Program, which requires significant community engagement as a prerequisite for receiving these grant funds. In the application, community engagement is allocated 27 points out of 100 total (which includes questions about community-based planning, employment or volunteer opportunities, and partnerships or committed funding). It asks for specific details about community meetings, not just how many were held or what came from them. It digs deeper to understand who the target audience was for each meeting, whether the target audience qualifies as an "underserved community" under the state's definition, how meetings were tailored specifically for the target audience (think time, location, language, and activities), and how the project reflects insights from those meetings and "resident's unique needs and creativity." To round out the application, applicants are even encouraged to share photos of meetings and community engagement activities.¹ This approach favors the authenticity of engagement with community residents over the shiny veneer of nicely designed renderings and well-written applications. It offers insight into the work that applicants have already done in communities to understand what residents want, rather than get feedback on a pre-determined project.² To see the full application, read the application guide [here](#).



- **Engagement Before and During/Throughout the Grant Award:** In the application for the Oregon Community Paths program, which combines federal and state funding for active transportation, applicants are asked about both past outreach and planned outreach related to the project.³ Ideally, applicants can address both by discussing the engagement they have done to prepare for the application and providing a community engagement plan for use during the project.

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Rather than asking for all of the information in essay questions, which may not be a point of strength for certain groups, provide the option to submit other forms of documentation that can demonstrate the work they have done. Here is a list of options that can do a great job of illustrating the quality of community engagement.

- Photos of people at meetings to discuss the project
- Photos or scanned copies of engagement activities such as drawings, written responses to prompts, or participatory budgeting worksheets
- Summaries of meetings, feedback, and how they affected the final project
- Materials used to solicit direct feedback from stakeholders in the project area (door-to-door engagement, community forums, etc.)
- A notice of the meeting and where that notice was posted
- Meeting agenda with the specific conceptual project listed^{4,5}



Photo Credit: Cultiva La Salud

A NOTE ABOUT LETTERS OF SUPPORT

Many funding programs ask for letters of support from elected officials, the public, or other special interest groups. Consider whose support is needed for a successful project and how you can help facilitate those connections. For example, infrastructure projects need support from the property owner. Some communities that may need the most investment may not have the political connections to get letters of recommendation from elected officials, government staff, or other influential groups even if they are proposing a great project. Consider holding office hours or providing technical assistance to help community groups connect to the formal support that they need to be successful.



Photo Credit: Shawnee Family YMCA

- Consider Adverse Impacts and Resistance:** Any change can pose challenges, even if the goal is to make routes to parks safe, equitable, and convenient for people walking and biking. Part of community engagement is understanding the concerns and resistance that people may have to a future project, so it is important to acknowledge that as part of the project proposal. For example, Michigan's Transportation Alternative Program application asks applicants to share a summary of any points of concern raised by the opposition, respond to those concerns, and share how they have communicated with parties opposing the project.⁶
- Listen to All Voices:** Be cautious of “squeaky wheels,” or the parties that have particularly loud voices in the engagement process. Community engagement can get overly influenced by the same, loud advocates who tend to show up to every meeting and drive decision-making. This can be due to several factors such as having more money, political influence, or privilege than other community members. This is very common, but it can look very different depending on the community. Urge applicants to consider which voices are present, who is being left out, and how they can specifically target the people they don't always hear from since these groups are often overlooked and under-resourced.⁷
- Reward Community-Centered Plans:** If a community has already done thorough community engagement and produced relevant plans, help them implement that planning and reward them for the work they have already done. Allocate additional points if the proposed project is part of existing community plans that were backed by thorough community engagement processes. Consider plans outside of the traditional comprehensive or master plans as long as they are developed through comprehensive public engagement. For example, in Indiana's Next Level Trails grant program, points are available for any proposals that relate to local or regional trail plans. This helps create continuity for a community-driven vision built over years rather than investing in piecemeal projects.

QUESTION BANK

Based on the information above, your program's goals, and what is feasible to change on your application, consider the questions below. You do not need to include all of them verbatim in your application, but get inspired to update your application with additional useful information for selecting projects that have significant community engagement as the foundation. Consider what information can be most useful and how you can minimize the burden on applicants. Ideally, they should be able to easily answer questions and provide materials that they already have to show their work rather than having to spend lots of time crafting materials specifically for the grant application.

- **Community Engagement Meetings:** Summarize the meetings that have occurred and who was able to participate.
 - » Provide the date/year, day of the week, and times (am/pm) of community engagement meetings
 - » Indicate the meeting type(s) and venue(s)
 - » Describe why the meeting(s) location(s) and time(s) were convenient for the target audience such as residents with various employment and family schedules and/or lack private transportation
 - » Describe the method(s) used to invite residents to the meeting
 - » Number of residents who participated in each meeting
 - » General description of residents (youth, seniors, other groups) who participated in the meetings [Identify if there are high-need or priority populations that you want to see participating]



Photo Credit: Can Do Houston

- **Process:** Describe how the participants identified, prioritized, and selected project elements.
 - » Describe how the residents were given the opportunity to provide their ideas
 - » List the project ideas and how they have been incorporated into the project proposal (avoid listing ideas that will not be included)
 - » Describe how participants discussed what elements to prioritize and what process was used to enable them to express their preferences
 - » List the reasons for the prioritization (avoid listing reasons that will not be used)
 - » If there is resistance to the project, please share those concerns and how you have either addressed or plan to address them
 - » General description of residents (youth, seniors, other groups) who participated in the process [Identify if there are high-need or priority populations that you want to see participating]
- **Next Steps:** Outline how this project will connect to a larger scope of work.
 - » Is this project aligned with any other local or regional plans? Please attach the relevant pages or provide links.
 - » How do you plan to maintain ongoing relationships for feedback from community residents?

TAKE THE NEXT STEP

- **Provide Resources to Support Better Community Engagement Practices**
 - » Provide guidance and technical assistance for communities who are interested in doing community engagement that goes beyond town halls. For example, the state of Colorado partnered with Safe Routes Partnership to produce a [community engagement guide](#) and series of webinars to discuss meaningful community engagement and other aspects of Safe Routes to School programs.
 - » Keep your door open to review applications before they are submitted. Provide feedback, suggestions, and ideas for how to broaden and deepen the applicant's engagement work. Staff at the California Department of Parks and Recreation running the Statewide Park Development and Community Revitalization Program are willing to help grantees with their applications as long as they are not writing it themselves, they see it as an opportunity to help get the best projects possible.⁸
- **Make community engagement part of required and funded grant activities or provide a planning and engagement grant.**
 - » Consider making ongoing community engagement a funded activity under your grants in addition to the funding that you typically provide for infrastructure or programming. This is valuable work that can build trust and momentum in communities, and it requires significant work and expertise that should be compensated. To structure this, consider having applicants submit a community engagement plan. For example, beginning in 2023, New Jersey is piloting a technical assistance program that sets aside money to provide consultant engineers to help applicants develop plans, specifications, and cost estimates.

Ultimately, the goal of asking these questions and understanding the work that applicants have done is to pick projects that reflect the needs and desires of the people who will be most affected by them. These public dollars belong to the people, so it is the public sector's responsibility to ensure funding goes to the projects that best reflect what the public wants. Plus, people who live in a community will have the best insight into the problems and opportunities—building applications that emphasize their insight will lead to better projects.





Photo Credit: Bike Share Pittsburgh

References

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