

A Checklist for Facilitating Community Engagement During Safe Routes to Parks Visioning Activities



There are many ways to engage residents in efforts to improve walking, bicycling, and public transportation access to parks and other destinations. From soliciting initial ideas to inviting feedback on conceptual designs to giving community members decision-making authority over developing and implementing solutions, organizations should involve community members in planning, implementation, and evaluation activities related to improving safe and equitable access to parks. While ongoing, collaborative efforts are the ideal, constraints on time and funding mean that organizations sometimes must host one-time community engagement events. However, if thoughtfully facilitated, one-time activities can fill a specific role of engaging residents in the development and implementation of efforts to enhance safe and equitable access to parks. This fact sheet aims to support organizations working to improve Safe Routes to Parks to meaningfully engage residents in park access improvement efforts.

Why is it important to engage residents in efforts to create community change?

Meaningful community engagement provides rewards to a variety of beneficiaries. Although sometimes engagement is initiated simply because it is a requirement for receiving funding for a community development initiative, it is important to note the plethora of benefits that these efforts can offer your initiative and the community, including:

- **Cost-efficiency:** By including community members' perspectives early on about what will actually make a difference for them, communities avoid spending money on "solutions" that do not meet the community's needs.
- **More responsive outcomes** resulting from a variety of community members coming together to identify what will make a difference for them.
- **More buy-in, community champions, and community ownership** of the change. When community members are involved from early on in the process, it fosters a greater sense of ownership of a project or outcome.
- **More use of the implemented change** due to the alignment with the community's needs.
- **More trusting relationships** with community members.

As you host community outreach and engagement events, reference this fact sheet for examples of questions to guide discussions and creative activities for engaging residents. This resource is intended to assist with developing events that engage marginalized and vulnerable populations, which often do not feel a part of transportation or active transportation planning efforts, such as people of color, low-income communities, older adults, youth, and people with disabilities.



Key Considerations for Engaging Community Events

Consider these items before your activity to help foster a process and atmosphere that is welcoming, genuine, and honors the needs of your participants.

Process

- ❖ **Expectations:** Be clear about the goals and expected outcomes of the activity. Let community members know from the beginning what decisions they have the power to influence and who is the ultimate decisionmaker.
- ❖ **Trust:** If you do not have deep relationships with the target population, partner with and hire groups that currently have relationships with your target population, or are staffed by people that demographically reflect the community or grew up in or now live in the neighborhood of focus to co-plan and lead the activity.
- ❖ **Power Dynamics:** Encourage decisionmakers who are attending the event to listen more often than speak in order to hear the perspectives of residents and ensure residents feel comfortable and open to share. Also, if possible, get input from community members when setting the agenda or offer participants time on the agenda to discuss topics of their choice.
- ❖ **Flexibility:** Be prepared to adjust the agenda to accommodate the energy around a particular discussion or activity.
- ❖ **Time:** Schedule a time that is best for the majority of your target population. For example, avoid scheduling on holidays (including specific cultural holidays to the population of focus), during school events, or during work hours specific to the population of focus.
- ❖ **Incentives:** Encourage participation by offering items or services that align with your target population's basic needs and barriers to attendance, such as serving a meal at the event, providing a transit pass, offering childcare during the event or incentives like a small stipend or a gift card for groceries. Be thoughtful about your incentives – you want them to encourage participation, but not to decrease interest in your activity by making it seem like something to do just to get the reward.
- ❖ **Participation:** Provide time for both sharing and receiving information; prioritize listening. Creatively and appropriately engage youth in activities when relevant. See examples below of guiding questions and activities to engage residents in the visioning of Safe Routes to Parks in their community.
- ❖ **Evaluation:** Select a tool to assess the effectiveness of your engagement activity, for example, a survey, interview, focus group, etc.
- ❖ **Follow-Up:** Determine how you will share the next steps and the impact of participation, and respond to unanswered questions or requests following the engagement.

Atmosphere

- ❖ **Location:** Select a place that your target population feels welcome, and that is convenient by foot, bike, or public transportation, such as community centers, senior centers, faith-based organizations, or cultural centers. Have greeters available to welcome and guide people to the designated area.
- ❖ **ADA Accessibility:** Make sure that the location is accessible for people with disabilities, for example, access to the building, restrooms, food, water, and materials.
- ❖ **Transportation:** Make transportation available to people who cannot easily access the location by foot, bicycle, or public transportation, such as renting a van to transport people or providing transit passes.
- ❖ **Food:** Offer culturally relevant foods and include options for people with common dietary restrictions (e.g., vegetarian, and nut-, gluten-, and dairy-free options). Be sure to have food options available for children when relevant.
- ❖ **Childcare:** Offer supervision for participants' kids if they will not be engaged in the activity.
- ❖ **Language:** Lead activities in your target population's primary language. Be sure that the presenter has a clear understanding of the cultural nuances of the language. Limit acronyms, and if you choose to use them, have a list of their meanings displayed in the room that participants can reference.
- ❖ **Interpretation/Sign Language:** If you are unable to lead activities in your target population's primary language, offer simultaneous interpretation for everyone so that non-English speakers do not feel singled out. Note: check with your local government agencies for simultaneous interpretation equipment or hire an organization that specializes in interpretation and translation. Involve interpreters and signers in your planning by providing details of the meeting and any information up front to give them an understanding of what they will be presenting. Remind those that are presenting to speak at a slower pace for the interpreter/signer.

Bringing Equitable Engagement to the City of Durham Place-Based Initiatives

The City of Durham, North Carolina's Neighborhood Improvement Services and residents that are most likely to be impacted by all city initiatives partnered to develop the Equitable Community Engagement Blueprint and Durham Belt Line Equitable Engagement Plans. As the city was developing the Durham Belt Line Trail Master Plan, they received dissatisfied feedback from residents concerning the lack of equitable engagement, so they developed these two engagement plans to not only lead the Durham Belt Line project, but all future place-based initiatives.¹ These plans recommend incorporating equitable engagement and development strategies for all city initiatives, such as partnering with local community organizations to conduct or co-lead engagement,² implementing an array of methods to effectively engage people that are most adversely impacted, and forming steering committees and other accountability groups consisting of underrepresented groups.³ The city has started to make strides toward equitable engagement through their recent approval for consulting work on their new Comprehensive Plan that includes funding for equitable engagement, including hiring members of the community to join an Outreach team to co-lead engagement efforts.⁴

- ❖ **Translation and Literacy Levels:** Make sure that all marketing flyers or event handouts are appropriately translated and presented at appropriate reading levels for your target population. Note: a general reading level is 8th grade. Use online services, like Grammarly, to tell you the literacy level of your materials.
- ❖ **Technological Literacy:** Be sure that the technical equipment used to gather or share information is user-friendly. Share detailed instructions and be available to assist folks in need.

Guiding Questions for Community Visioning

When you pull residents together for one-time community engagement events, it is often used as a time to conduct community visioning. This is a method used to gather the perspectives of residents about what they'd like to see in their community regarding a particular topic, such as improving safe and equitable park access. The questions below can be tailored to fit your target population and help you to spur discussions and collect information on community-identified priorities to help improve Safe Routes to Parks in your community. Depending on the size of your group, the number of questions selected may vary.

- ❖ When was the last time you visited the park, and what are your memories of it?
- ❖ Have you ever walked, biked, or taken public transportation to the park?
 - If no, why not (considering the walking and bicycling facilities or supports, personal danger, such as harassment or crime and violence, and interest in using the park)?
 - If yes, share more about your experience on the route in terms of safety, comfort, and appeal (considering the walking and bicycling facilities or supports and personal danger, such as harassment or crime and violence)?
 - About how far was the walk to the park?
 - Are there things that are uninviting along the route or at the park itself (e.g., crime, presence or lack of presence of law enforcement, not being able to gather socially, types of programming activity)? If yes, please share more about that.
 - What is your ideal route to get to the park?
 - Was the park well-maintained?
 - Are you satisfied with the park and the activities available? If not, what else would you like to see there?
- ❖ What does safety mean to you?
 - On a scale of 1 to 5, how safe do you feel walking along the route to the park?
 - What is your biggest concern about safety (traffic or personal safety) in and around the park? Is there a problem spot?
 - What would make you feel safer right now (traffic or personal safety)?
 - Who do you feel most comfortable enforcing safety along the route and in your community, law enforcement, a neighborhood watch group, or both?
 - What street in your community is most beautiful to you or comfortable to walk? Please share more about that.
- ❖ What are some things that you like about your culture (way of life: food, music, art, lifestyle, customs, clothing, etc.)?
 - When you look around your community, especially in and around the park, do you see those characteristics represented?
 - If yes, what?
 - If no, was this always the case, or is there a sense of loss of place due to changes in the environment? Please share more about that.
 - What changes in and around the park would you like to see to remind you of your culture or support cultural activities?
- ❖ Have you been involved in other efforts to create community change, especially those that include your local municipality?
 - If yes, please share more, including what you liked or did not like about the engagement process.?
 - Would you like to be involved in efforts to improve safe access to parks in your community?
 - If yes, how would you like to be involved?
 - If no, are there challenges or barriers that are keeping you from participating?
- ❖ Who else should be included in these efforts? Any particular groups or individuals you work with or know?
- ❖ What are the best ways to stay connected with you (e.g., email, door-to-door knocking, flyers, social media)?

Activities for Community Visioning

Talking is an effective way to get information, but not everyone likes to participate in large group discussions. Use these activities to creatively engage residents in envisioning safe and equitable access to parks in their community. These activities are intergenerational and can be tailored to meet the needs of various ages.

Planning for the Future Icebreaker

The purpose of this activity is to help residents warm up to one another by exploring how they view their community now and envision it in the future.

Instructions: Distribute a blank piece of paper to each participant and give them approximately five minutes to draw a visual of their choice of how they see their community.⁵ After they have their map or abstract drawing, have them share with someone seated near them, and then ask for a couple of volunteers to share their image and ideas with the group.⁶ Ask, “how may these same communities have looked when your grandparents were young?”⁷ Record their responses to the differences in the form of a drawing or list on a board or large post-it.⁸ Then discuss how the community will look in the next 50-80 years if the same circumstances persist, and record their responses next to the others in the form of a drawing or list.⁹ Have participants visualize and draw on the back of their original papers what they want their community to look like in the future with equitable and inclusive community land use planning.¹⁰ Lastly, have participants share their visuals with another person at the event and ask for volunteers to share their drawings with the group.¹¹

Participatory Budgeting

This activity will help to gather useful information about community priorities for solutions to improve safe and equitable access to parks.

Instructions: Post a list of Safe Routes to Parks-related improvements (such as lighting, benches, water fountains, shared use paths) along with their costs. Hand each participant fake money and ask them to vote with their dollars on their park access priorities. Let folks know they will have to choose their priority improvements wisely because they will not receive additional funds.

Participatory Budgeting Process Helps Community Prioritize Park Recommendations

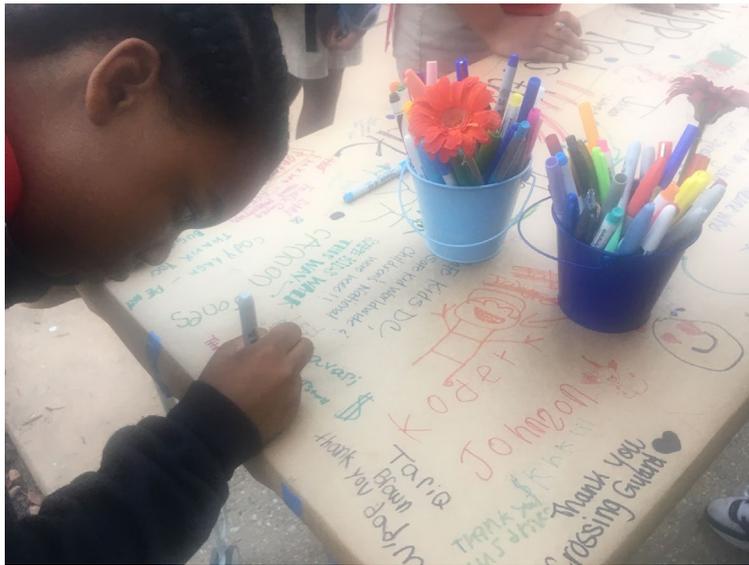
Cultiva La Salud, a 2018 Safe Routes to Parks grantee, used the participatory budgeting process to prioritize park improvements. After completing a Safe Routes to Parks walk audit and other assessment activities, Cultiva La Salud held a community gathering to prioritize the resident input and recommendations. Signs depicting various improvement projects and their price tags were placed around the room while residents were given play money to select their priority improvements by voting with their dollars. As a result, the Houlihan Planada Park Improvement Plan’s recommendations were prioritized based upon the community’s votes, and residents gained a better understanding of the challenges their local governments face in trying to fund numerous community projects. The Municipal Advisory Committee and Planada Parks and Recreation Commission approved the Houlihan Planada Park Improvement Plan.



Graffiti Wall Activity

This activity is designed to elicit resident input concerning Safe Routes to Parks-related topics in an easy, straightforward manner.

Instructions: Write a question on a large bulletin paper (or a size that will fit all of the comments of your participants), such as “What are some of the things you like about your culture that you do not see in and around the park?” Have folks respond with a visual or text.



Free Write and Painting Activity

The purpose of this activity is to allow residents to individually process and share their thoughts about a Safe Routes to Parks-related topic, also create a space for folks to connect and create art together out of those thoughts.

Instructions: Ask participants to write their responses to “Think about two separate occasions where you walked to a park, open space, or other destination and felt safe and unsafe” or any relevant topic on a piece of paper. Then have the participants circle key phrases from their free write followed by placing the phrases on a large bulletin paper (or relevant sized paper). After, put on music and have folks spend about 20 minutes painting the paper. Then, have participants decide what they want to do with the art, such as posting it in a community space or taking a photo of it and dividing it up for everyone to bring a piece home. Optional: offer a time for people to share more about what they wrote on the paper.

Free Write and Poem Activity

This activity will allow folks to both individually process and share their perspective about a particular Safe Routes to Parks topic and work with their peers to collectively express their thoughts about the issue creatively.

Instructions: Ask participants to write their responses to “What street in your community is most beautiful to you and comfortable to walk?” or any relevant topic on a piece of paper. Then have the participants circle key phrases from their free write followed by writing their phrases on a separate piece of paper. Put folks into small groups (depending on the number of participants) and ask them to put their papers on the ground or large table and come up with a poem. In the end, have each group act out or say their poems.

Resident Storytelling

This activity is designed to create a space for residents to share their perspectives and impacts of safe and equitable access to parks with a partner and then have that message conveyed to the group.

Instructions: Have participants break into pairs for five minutes and answer a specific question(s), such as “How has the lack of access to a park or other favorite destination impacted you and your loved ones?” As the first person shares have the other person listen to their response (and record if necessary). In the end, with their permission, have folks present the stories they heard.



Conclusion

Improving safe park access requires the inclusion of those that are most likely to be affected by the change. As you use the information you learned to help develop and implement solutions for Safe Routes to Parks, check out these [five fact sheets](#) on incorporating equity into the Safe Routes to Parks Action Framework: engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, and sustainability.



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