

Roadmap for Equitable Engagement

Strategies and tools to support the City's transportation planning process

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

In 1995, Vancouver's Greenways Plan proposed the creation of a greenway network connecting neighbourhoods and destinations across the city¹. Today, more than 60% of that network has been developed, and greenways are a part of what makes Vancouver among the greenest and most livable cities in the world². City staff were recently directed to refresh the 1995 Plan with an updated vision for greenways in Vancouver³. This refresh will be guided by public engagement; a process which should also be updated to reflect best practices and, specifically, the City's current thinking about equity⁴. The purpose of this project is to support the Greenways Plan refresh through providing recommendations for equitable engagement on greenways.

Background

Over the past 25 years, City staff have become increasingly aware of the need for engagements to actively reach out to disproportionately impacted populations so that the process and outcomes meet the needs of all residents. The City has recently released an Equity Framework which outlines the City's understanding of equity and states their institutional commitments towards advancing equity⁵. This project identifies four of the commitments most relevant to public engagement: (1) *adequately resourcing equity work*; (2) *fostering strong relationships*; (3) *creating spaces for learning*; (4) and *ongoing accountability, evaluation and monitoring of equity process and outcomes*. The following research explores principles and strategies for how we might advance these commitments through engagements on greenways in the City of Vancouver.

Methodology

Three methods were employed in addressing the research aim:

1. Case studies from three other municipalities (Atlanta, Portland and St Louis) of public engagement practices that center equity. The case studies provided ideas about exemplary equitable engagement practices and offered insight into how we might better reach disproportionately impacted populations.
2. In order to ground recommendations in the Vancouver context, a virtual focus group was conducted with City of Vancouver engagement practitioners who have expertise working with systemically disadvantaged groups. The topic of the discussion was barriers and opportunities for addressing the Equity Commitments through public engagement.
3. A review of selected literature and other data sources about equity and public engagement was conducted to provide a broader theoretical grounding to the recommendations⁶.

Case Studies of Public Engagements

Incorporating Equity into the 2015 Climate Action Plan in Portland, Oregon: Portland's 2015 Climate Action Plan was supported by an intentional community engagement process via a working group structure. The working group, a partnership between community organization leaders and City staff, aimed to integrate equity into the Plan and to build capacity for community-based climate change action. *Key takeaways for equitable public engagement: paying community members for their time; community learning and capacity building as resources provided by engagements; and the importance formalized and transparent decision-making processes to hold the City accountable and ensure implementation of feedback from the public.*⁷

Great Rivers Greenway in St Louis Region, Missouri: The Great Rivers Greenway is a public agency created to develop and maintain greenways. Their public engagements are guided by an Engagement Strategy that lays out the overarching values, expectations and processes for all greenways. An Artists of Color Council consulted on greenway design, ensuring local character was represented and local artists supported through greenway development. *Key takeaways for equitable public engagement: remaining present in the neighbourhood after greenway construction to maintain relationships, basing evaluation in community perception of projects, and using an overarching strategy to facilitate internal learning from previous engagements.*⁸

Atlanta Beltline: Greenway Urban Redevelopment in Atlanta, Georgia: The Atlanta Beltline is a 33-mile greenway that forms the centerpiece of an extensive urban redevelopment project. The project confronts Atlanta's long history of geographic segregation between racial and socio-economic groups. The public engagement process is legislatively mandated by City Council, creating a formalized framework for all community interaction. They also created a publicly available Neighbourhood Data Explorer that tracks equity-related variables in the areas surrounding the greenway overtime. *Key takeaways for equitable public engagement: accompanying greenway construction with investments in the surrounding communities to combat gentrification, accountability through making on-going evaluation metrics public, and formalizing engagement processes so that follow-through is not dependent on staff efficacy.*⁹

Focus Group with City of Vancouver Engagement Practitioners

The focus group results outline opportunities for and barriers to equitable engagement from the perspective of City of Vancouver engagement practitioners. Four overarching themes emerged from the discussion (1) centering long-term relationships over short-term projects, (2) embedding equity, (3) respecting existing community and meeting people where they are, and (4) directly resourcing community members and community priorities.

Recommendations

This research clarified the specific importance of equitable engagement in the context of municipal planning of greenways. Greenway development can benefit neighborhoods with disproportionately impacted populations, but also risks contributing to gentrification. Public engagement, if done equitably, can be one part of how greenways advance equity.

The most significant finding through this research is that equity problems and solutions are much bigger than public engagement. Findings from the focus groups, case studies and literature research indicated that moving the dial on equitable engagement requires changes at the level of projects and the institution. First, public engagements must be given sufficient time and resources, and be provided a higher degree of influence early on in the project timeline. Second, improved equity expertise amongst higher level management at the City of Vancouver will be essential for embedding equity in public engagements and all City work. And finally, structural changes at the institutional level are required to orient City work, in engagements and otherwise, towards addressing community priorities.

There is also room for advancing equity within the scope of work undertaken by engagement practitioners. These are expressed as guiding principles for public engagement on greenways.

1. **Formalize and embed equity practices:** *Ex. Formalize the engagement roles and processes for how feedback will be integrated into decision-making on a project*
2. **Meet communities where they are at:** *Ex. Provide engagement materials and supports in locations that are already accessed by community members, for example by setting up a booth and support staff in a public library to help local residents participate.*
3. **Center long-term relationships over short-term projects:** *Ex. To maintain continuity of relationships when community contact staff move on, have the previous contact staff introduce the new staff to community members.*
4. **Create spaces for learning---for staff and community members:** *Ex. Research previous engagements and collaborate with other project teams to learn from previous engagements and build on existing City-community relationships.*
5. **Build trust through accountability, transparency and on-going evaluation:** *Ex. Include community-based metrics for evaluation---ask the public about their experience of a project and if their expectations of the City were met.*
6. **Directly resource community members and community priorities:** *Ex. Provide financial compensation for community members' time; and consider other forms of meaningful reciprocity such as capacity building and skills training, stimulating local economies by hiring local vendors and staff, and providing networking opportunities.*

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