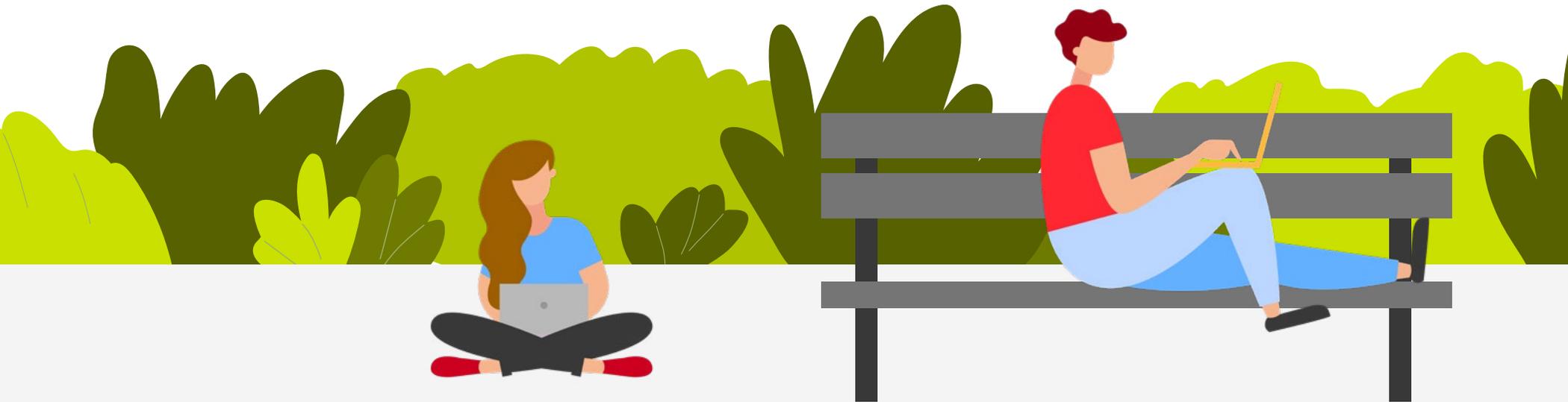


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# Creating an Effective Community Engagement Plan:

A Guide for Parks and Recreation Departments



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**Many parks and recreation departments struggle to effectively engage their communities, resulting in underutilized facilities, a lack of public support for initiatives, and difficulty securing funding for projects. Therefore, by prioritizing effective community engagement, parks and recreation departments can ensure their spaces and programs thrive.**

**The only question is, *how?* This e-book answers that question, providing actionable guidance for parks and recreation departments to implement right away.**

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## INTRODUCTION

# Understanding Community Engagement

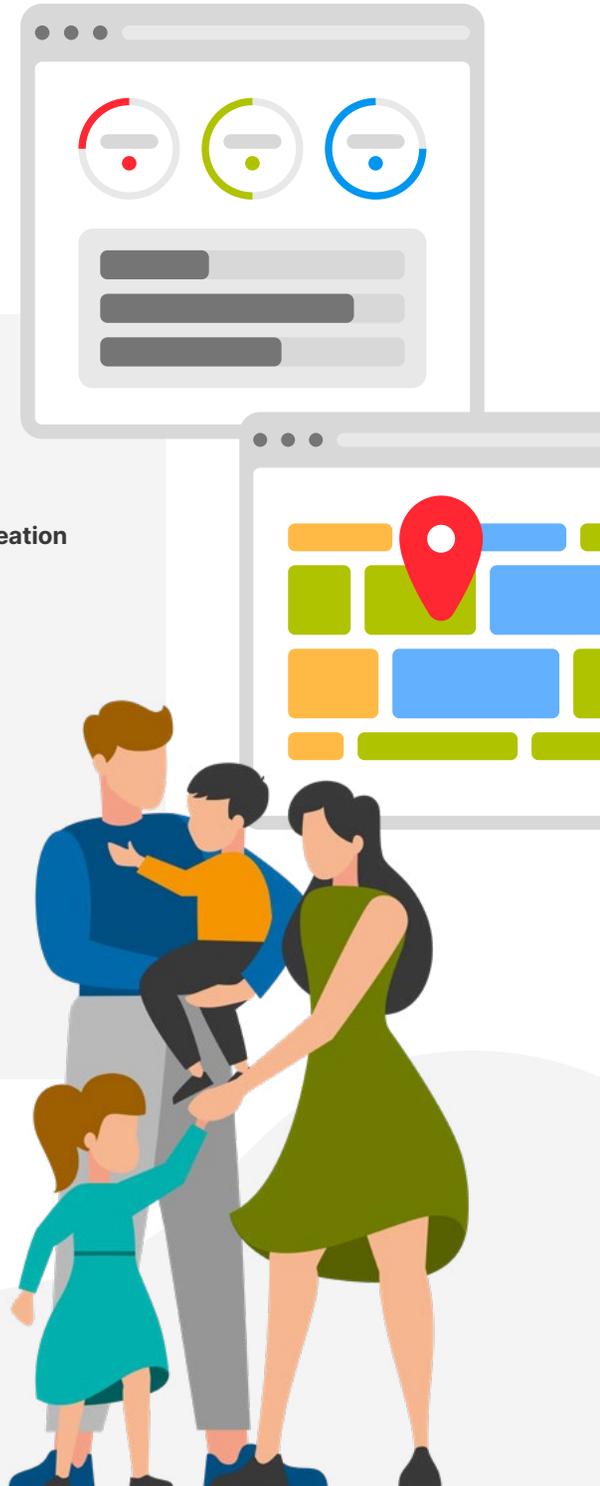
Community engagement involves collaborating with groups of people who share geographic proximity, interests, or similar situations affecting their well-being. This process places a premium on fostering and enhancing trust as a critical element in long-term, sustainable engagement and effective governance.

Research shows parks and recreation departments that engage with their communities have a higher level of public support and are more likely to secure funding for their projects. By engaging with residents, parks and recreation departments also gain important insights into the preferences and needs of their communities while building relationships. Ultimately, incorporating resident feedback into planning and decision-making enables parks and recreation departments to better serve their communities.

## TL;DR

**Community engagement is important to parks and recreation departments because it:**

- Increases the use and enjoyment of parks and recreation facilities
- Builds public support for parks and recreation initiatives
- Helps secure funding for parks and recreation projects





## CHAPTER 1

# Creating a Community Engagement Plan

Now that we've established parks and recreation departments must engage with their communities to be successful, let's dig into tactics for engagement. The first and arguably most important is creating a community engagement plan. Ideally, a community engagement plan will be developed for each parks and recreation project or initiative according to the following steps:





## Step #1

### Outline the project/initiative and timeline:

- Explore the crucial role of public input in shaping the success of the project/initiative.
- Identify key decision-makers and pinpoint pivotal dates for formal decisions.
- Verify whether the project/initiative is feasible within the given time frame.
- Delve into the ripple effects of the project/initiative, considering all who will be impacted.
- Determine if you will seek feedback from the entire community or just from those who will be directly affected.

## Step #2

### Establish the desired engagement level:

- Reference the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation found [here](#) to assist you in defining the public's role.
- Keep the desired engagement level at the heart of the project/initiative planning process. If the public and/or their feedback is not useful and/or influential to the outcome of the project/initiative at this point, reconsider the purpose and/or timeline.

## Step #3

### Identify and contact stakeholders:

While the broader public should always be informed of and included in a project/initiative, stakeholder groups are a distinct list of impacted people, neighborhoods, businesses, and organizations that should be specifically engaged. These are also the key individuals who will spend more time and effort contributing to the project/initiative.

- Consider aspects such as geographic location, expertise, oppositional viewpoints, legal requirements, and communication and accessibility needs.
- Don't forget internal stakeholders including members of councils, boards, commissions, and other municipal departments.



## Step #4

### Provide informational materials:

- Compile documents, memos, videos, photos, maps, historical data, and more to ensure the public is able to provide helpful feedback.
- Ensure project/initiative details are available online and in print form for those unable to access the Internet.

## Step #5

### Engage the community:

Use as many techniques, to reach as many people as possible. However, be sure that all efforts lead back to a single, up-to-date source of truth. In many cases, this source of truth will be your [municipal website](#).

- Create and distribute materials such as fact sheets, newsletters, brochures, progress reports, letters, and postcards.
- Host events like charrettes, community juries, coffee chats, study circles, deliberative forums, focus groups, open houses, public meetings, fairs, and workshops.
- Assemble community advisory groups to come up with ideas and form task forces to develop specific policies or recommendations.
- Distribute videos and recorded presentations to individuals unable to attend in-person events.
- Utilize comment forms, online polling and surveys, interviews, and mailed questionnaires

## Step #6

### Assess the feedback:

- Assign staff to collect data throughout the process, instead of trying to compile it all at the very end. This helps ensure records are being accurately kept in real time, and any questions about the feedback can be promptly answered.
- Determine how the feedback will be presented to stakeholders. For instance, will council members need to see each direct quote or would a summary of opinions suffice?
- Consider what types of follow-up questions the feedback might spark, so you can proactively gather supporting information to keep the project/initiative moving forward.



## Step #7

### Follow through with the community:

- Summarize the public's opinions, thoughts, and ideas along with details about the decision-making process.
- Show gratitude for the community's input by taking the time to communicate how their voices were heard.
- Illuminate the rationale behind related project/initiative choices and alternatives.
- Optimize transparency by distributing this information to the community through the same channels and techniques used for engagement.





## CHAPTER 2

# Evaluating Community Engagement Plan Effectiveness

To be successful, community engagement must encompass strategies and processes sensitive to the community-context in which it occurs. Once the project or initiative is complete, ask the following questions to evaluate your community engagement plan's effectiveness:

- What worked? What didn't work? What could have been done differently? What went better than expected?
- Were the right stakeholders involved? Who was missing or overlooked? Were stakeholders involved at the right stages or points in time?
- Did the plan allow for all voices to be heard and equally valued? Could the mechanism for decision-making or coming to consensus be improved? How were conflicts handled?



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Be sure to consider how the process can be refined to ensure meaningful public engagement in the future. Simply using a set of metrics to gauge effectiveness won't guarantee meaningful results. However, you can factor in key performance indicators such as:

- Social media likes, views, comments, shares, and direct messages
- Website visits
- File downloads
- Feedback submissions
- Emails
- Phone calls
- Event attendance

**To be successful, community engagement must encompass strategies and processes sensitive to the community-context in which it occurs.**





## CONCLUSION

# Capturing Hearts and Enthusiasm Is Key

Unlocking the full potential of parks and recreation requires vibrant community engagement. When parks and recreation departments prioritize connecting with their communities, they set the stage for thriving spaces and programs that capture hearts and enthusiasm. Remember: it's not just about projects or initiatives — it's about fostering and enhancing public trust.

