

Introduction

This Community Engagement Plan (CEP) was created as a guide for building community engagement strategies that can be tailored to specific topics addressed in the Town's upcoming Comprehensive Planning process. Given the preferred approach of the Planning Board to pursue a "living" Comprehensive Plan, one that can be revised as attitudes and issues evolve, the CEP represents a commitment to community engagement that aligns with values of inclusivity. It is meant to provide a measure of consistency in planning as individual departments, boards and committees pursue drafting plan chapters specific to their area of interest or expertise.

Background

Over the course of the past year, members of the Stow *Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion* group, *Nashoba Area Social Justice Alliance*, and Staff in the Planning Department began researching best practices in community engagement by attending workshops provided by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, meeting with municipal officials experienced in community engagement planning and reviewing relevant plan examples from town's that have implemented similar efforts. The research led to the creation of the Stow Planning Department's *Community Engagement Working Group* for the purpose of drafting a plan for further review by Stow departments, boards and committees. The Community Engagement Working Group anticipates this CEP to be a starting point – an idea for Stow officials and residents to refine and amend as Stow changes and adapts to new challenges and opportunities.

Purpose of Community Engagement

In the context of comprehensive planning, Community Engagement is less about simply obtaining public feedback, and more about harnessing the diversity of our interests, providing agency, and visibility to all community members and recognizing that individual growth and learning are an integral part of creating a community founded on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The Stow Planning Board anticipates the creation of a "living" comprehensive plan. A living plan is an evolving plan, continuously updated over the years to better reflect the current issues and opportunities facing the town. However, creating a plan that is not a static document, requires a commitment to form and process to ensure that all responsible parties are committed to achieving an acceptable standard of community involvement. This CEP offers tools and tactics for building a comprehensive plan that is able to stand firm against the challenges that are sure to come.

Specifically, the CEP Working Group anticipates this plan to provide the following benefits:

- Building community support for recommendations, goals and action steps in the Comprehensive Plan;
- Improve accountability and transparency in the Town's community engagement process;
- Providing participants working on the Comprehensive Plan with the context, methods, and tools for effective community involvement;
- Creating consistency in engagement processes across departments and boards;

- Providing metrics for determining effectiveness of community engagement and allowing flexibility for ongoing modifications in scope, details, and timeframes to calibrate engagement approaches over time.

Roles and Responsibilities

Town Staff

Town staff will assist their respective Departments, Boards or Committees implement the day to day community engagement strategy. Staff will offer guidance, conforming to the goals and aspirations of the CEP to the extent practicable. Staff will manage communication with relevant stakeholders, and provide logistical support for engagement in concert with volunteers and any hired consultants. Specific Staff responsibilities may include ensuring all public meetings are appropriately noticed according to Massachusetts Open Meeting Law, advising any consultants on CEP goals, and managing contact with local, state and regional entities as needed.

Consultants

Consultants may provide a variety of roles depending on the specific scope of services they are hired for. However, the most efficient use of consultants, may be during the initial, town-wide visioning phase of the Comprehensive Plan. Consultants are well suited to co-develop and implement specific community engagement processes, such as focus groups, interviews, and charettes. Further, they may be positioned to serve as neutral third parties that can create safe spaces for sensitive feedback. Consultants may be used for technical assistance as well, including data analysis, drafting of branded engagement materials, as well as content for project websites and social media. Additionally, consultants may provide a channel for peer review of Town led engagement strategies, and assist in determining the thoroughness of any one approach.

Master Plan Committee

Stow's Town Charter charges the Master Plan Committee with oversight and development of the Master Plan. The Master Plan committee will review specific chapters of the Comprehensive Plan as they are developed, provide feedback for the authors, and offer a sounding board for concepts, ideas, and recommendations before they are submitted to the Planning Board for inclusion in the Comprehensive Plan. In fulfilling its obligation to the Town Charter, the Master Plan Committee may further assist departments and boards in their engagement approach, ensure core directives of the CEP are being adhered to, review metrics and actively participate in engagement activities where applicable. It is yet undetermined whether the Master Plan Committee will remain intact through the long term, as the "living" plan approach is an ongoing effort.

Lastly, as part of the commitment to shared language described more fully below, the Community Engagement Working Group recommends that the Master Plan be referred to as the "Comprehensive Plan," for the purpose of the upcoming planning effort.

Planning Board

The Planning Board has the statutory authority through M.G.L c.81D, to coordinate and complete a Master Plan for Stow. Given the role of the Master Plan Committee via the Town Charter, the Planning Board's primary role will be to review and administer the year-over-year

updates to the living plan. The Planning Board may review the Plan, make edits, suggest ideas for further community engagement and prepare the Plan for Town Meeting ratification as needed.

Town Boards and Committees

Members of appointed or elected Boards and/or Committees have the primary task of working alongside Staff and consultants for the purpose of developing and implementing specific community engagement strategies in accordance with the group's specific area of focus.

Committee members will identify relevant stakeholders, develop accurate messaging and collect community data for the purpose of identifying issues and outlining recommendations. Committee and Board members will prepare information and Comprehensive plan chapters for further review by the Master Plan Committee and Planning Board.

Building a Community Engagement Strategy

Vision

The Community Engagement Strategy is built upon a commitment to Stow as a community where all feel a sense of belonging regardless of race, class, ethnicity, religion, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, income, and other [dimensions of diversity](#); where a culture of participation is encouraged at all government levels and decisions are informed by democratic processes that build dialog and consensus for representation of all voices. The Community Engagement Strategy reaches for processes and policies that are free from disparate impacts on marginalized groups, and that use the commitment to inclusivity and diversity of experience to celebrate a variety of cultures and individuals.

Core Values

A series of core values are meant as a guide to development and implementation of the Town's Community Engagement practices. They include, but are not limited to:

- Individual growth and learning are an integral part of creating a community founded on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion;
- Commitment to consensus building;
- Providing visibility to the invisible;
- Speaking to the future;
- Understanding how inherited trends, policies and events inform current views;
- Recognition that the definition of an issue informs the solution;
- Offering multiple venues for including voices and participation;
- Recognition that privilege and power inform who is included and whose voice is heard;
- Conversations as opportunities to learn and build shared experience;
- Personal experience informs our understanding and interpretations.

Shared Language

The words, terms and language expressed in the Comprehensive Plan will reflect a mutual respect and understanding for the individual experiences and cultural context of Stow residents. Language that signals historical bias or exclusion will be avoided and replaced with terms that

can adapt to our evolving social norms. Shared language that supports inclusivity will be used for the purpose of building bonds in the community – an indication of community optimism and strength.

Community Engagement Goals

A genuine effort to reach all voices will help the Town of Stow create a more resilient community, one built on trust and accountability. The CEP goals include:

- Building trust across communities of people in Stow;
- Creating planning outcomes that have a diverse base of support;
- Providing assurances that Comprehensive Planning processes will follow an established and agreed upon framework;
- Strengthening awareness of town government processes and the role of citizen engagement;
- Creating opportunities to engage residents in the comfort of their own community spaces and/or through trusted leaders;
- Ensure voices that have historically been left out of community decision making are not only included, but able to participate in the visioning, planning, and monitoring of the work in an authentic way.
- Offering agency to community members and enabling champions of causes to emerge.

Engagement Process

The specific task of designing a Community Engagement Strategy will be guided by the values and goals of this Community Engagement Plan. The approach borrows from best practices identified and refined by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, and further amended to include the unique characteristics of Stow.

5 Steps of Community Engagement

Insert Visual?

The process of community engagement follows 5 steps with a series of guiding questions and recommendations to ensure confidence in the results of the effort:

1. Define Purpose of Engagement
 - a. Is the goal of engagement to educate, inform, collaborate or empower?
 - b. Why is engagement significant to this particular Comprehensive Plan topic?
 - c. What can we learn from past engagement processes on this topic in Stow?
 - d. How will engagement inform the process?
 - e. What does successful engagement look like in the short and long term?
2. Identify Stakeholders
 - a. Identify and define a list of potential stakeholders using this CEP, local data, interviews with community members, and other sources;

- b. For each stakeholder identified, ask yourself the following:
 - How could they be impacted by the outcome of plan recommendations?
 - What might be their level of support for the specific planning effort?
 - How could the stakeholder impact the project outcomes?
 - What could their level of influence be?

3. Resources, Challenges, Opportunity and Scale

- a. Identify resources that you can use in the engagement effort?
 - Do you have a budget?
 - Is staff time available?
 - Who are your potential local partners?
 - What are your established relationships in the community?
- b. Identify scale of engagement
 - Broad: Most stakeholder groups are engaged in the effort.
 - Moderate: Some stakeholder groups are taken into account.
 - Limited: Stakeholders are targeted and defined.
- c. Identify barriers to effective community involvement to inform messaging and engagement tactics. Barriers may include but not be limited to:
 - Government involvement feels intimidating;
 - Unfamiliarity with municipal processes;
 - May feel their voice will not be heard;
 - Hesitancy to be involved due to feeling of inadequacy regarding education on a specific topic;
 - The questions on digital surveys may inform or lead the respondent to the answer;
 - Reliance on surveys may limit possibilities and complexities of an issue;
 - Costly to participate in events for parents who have to pay for childcare;
 - Language barriers;
 - Intimidation due to unfamiliarity with other participants;
 - Lack of trust in the municipal or government establishment;
 - Attendance conflicts with work schedules;
 - Lack of association or belonging within broader Stow community;
 - Cannot associate impact on daily life;
 - Lack of easily accessible and/or regularly updated information on various Town projects and efforts.

4. Develop Messaging

- a. Create messages that appeal to self interest: Why should the recipient of your messaging care?

- b. Tailor messaging to stakeholder groups: If I were (stakeholder x) why would my involvement matter?
 - c. Are there results from previous engagement efforts that can provide insight into different stakeholder perceptions of the issue?
5. Determine tools and tactics for engagement
Taking the information gained in tasks 1 – 4, identify the tools and techniques best suited to engage your target audience.

Figure XX: Tools and Techniques for Attracting Participation



Figure XX: Tactics for Engagement



Performance Metrics

A successful engagement process includes metrics that enable managers to track progress and gauge the effectiveness of selected approaches and techniques. Metrics provide an opportunity for improving techniques and/or changing tactics in the midst of the process to make corrections as needed.

The following metrics are meant to guide the development and tracking of individual community engagement strategy targets, and offer questions and considerations for review if specific efforts fall short of anticipated engagement goals.

| Metric | How is it measured? | What are examples quantitative/qualitative target? |
|--|---|--|
| Number of individuals engaged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting attendance/participation • Number of individuals who participate in engagement activities • number of survey responses received | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of individuals participating in at least one engagement activity over the course of the project; • The diversity of or number of differing engagement opportunities offered. |
| Number of individuals informed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media reach, e.g. views/likes/shares/reach • Webpage views • Mailing list entries • number of people invited to activities • Requests for information • Meeting attendees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # individuals informed about the process • Variety of venues and strategies for reaching identified stakeholders |
| Number of people deeply engaged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:1 or group interviews • In-depth conversations • Focus Group attendees • Project Management Meetings • Amount of time people spend engaging on topic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # individuals deeply engaged in process • Key champions identified to take on further outreach /implementation |
| Diversity of interests | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sectoral or jurisdictional representation in engagement activities • type of group engaged • Focus or interest area of group or individual engaged | Multiple connections with community members from each major group (as described above) |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Inclusivity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age, race, gender, ethnicity • Residency, e.g., year-around vs. seasonal, owner vs. renter • Current vs. prospective residents • School population engaged | Participation is representative of Town of Stow demographics |
|--------------------|---|--|

Ideas for Reaching Stakeholders

As you develop a community engagement strategy, consider the following methods to reach various types of common stakeholder groups.

| Examples of Stakeholder Groups | Outreach Methods / How to Reach Stakeholder Group |
|---|---|
| Residents - English as a second language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships: (organizations, groups, schools, healthcenters; • Translate request materials into other languages and contact information on outreach materials • Immigration attorney offices • Cultural associations • Cultural events |
| Residents with Disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships • Disability commissions • Community health centers • Council on Aging |
| Households with Young Children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PTA meetings • Communication through the school system • Childcare institutions • Early education centers • Cultural organizations • YMCAs • Food pantries • shelters • Food service programs • Sending information in backpacks |
| Residents Working More than one job | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce development centers • Career centers • Economic development and Industrial Commission |

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|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management companies • Transit hubs |
| Small Business Owners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chamber of commerce • Walking tour • off hours Quick calls • Personal relationships • Short email questionnaires • Facebook groups |
| Older Adults | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council on Aging • Management companies • Flyers • Outreach from town committee |
| Youth and young adults 18 - 34-year-olds | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School civics clubs, • social studies, • After school programs • Summer camps • Social media • Targeted FB ads • Outreach from master plan committee |
| Renters/ cost-burdened owners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management companies • First time homebuyer classes • Ready Renter Lists • Contacts with MetroWest Collaborative Development |
| New Residents | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome packet from town • Facebook groups • Committee contacts |
| Racially and Ethnically Diverse Populations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations • Cultural Institutions • Places of Worship • Diversity Groups in Municipalities |

Troubleshooting

Below is a list of guiding questions to ask yourself if the community engagement strategy failed to provide the anticipated engagement results:

- Was the stakeholder analysis accurate? Were any groups missed, or under/over-represented?
- Were the chosen methods of engagement tailored to the key stakeholders?

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- Do any of the results collected suggest a lack of understanding or education on the topic addressed?
 - Are there opportunities for education prior to seeking engagement?
 - Could the issue or topic be framed in a different manner to connect to the interests of the stakeholder groups identified?
- Were there opportunities to fit varying stakeholder comfort levels, such as public, private, in-persona and/or virtual settings and approaches?
 - Could third party delivery or representation helped to improve comfort in participation.

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