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Memo

Date: September 8, 2017

To: Transportation, Energy, and Utilities Committee

From: Nicole Losch, PTP, Senior Planner
Rob Goulding, Public Information Manager
Chapin Spencer, Director

Subject: Public Engagement Plan and Engagement Process

Background

As the North Avenue Pilot Project concluded through a July 10, 2017 City Council resolution, the Department of Public Works (DPW) was directed to develop a written report regarding how public outreach processes used in Corridor Studies can be improved. Additionally, at their August 7, 2017 meeting, City Council referred a resolution to the Transportation, Energy and Utilities Committee (TEUC) to work with the Administration, identify further guidance that should be given to the DPW Commission regarding implementation of planBTV Walk Bike, and report back to City Council by September 25, 2017.

After an initial conversation with the TEUC at the August 7, 2017 meeting, the DPW was directed to draft a preliminary report that addresses both concerns: public engagement for Corridor Studies and the processes used to implement public engagement strategies.

Public Engagement Plan and Engagement Processes

Attached you will find a preliminary Public Engagement Plan, including an Appendix of Engagement Processes by project type. This Plan not only applies to Corridor Studies and projects that implement Master Plans, but all other types of DPW projects.

There are some unspoken assumptions about public engagement in this plan:

1. Our goal is to provide meaningful opportunities for every individual to engage if they are interested and able.
2. Best practices, public safety, regulatory requirements and the needs of the community inform every decision we make.

3. Public engagement will vary for each project due to the unique nature of each project, the neighborhood, the issue addressed, and the potential impacts, etc.
4. The number of people engaged in conceptual planning is often less than the number of people engaged in project planning and project outreach (when they may be directly impacted).
5. Conflicting opinions are sometimes unavoidable and discomfort with change is a natural part of planning and project development. People generally value what they have and may be anxious over something unfamiliar even if seeks to address a safety issue.
6. Streets can change. Projects can be public engagement opportunities in themselves, and project installation is not the final step for engagement or change.

Public Engagement for Corridor Studies

Public outreach for Corridor Studies has traditionally followed the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission’s (CCRPC) Public Participation Plan. This plan was updated in 2014 and emphasized new strategies to reach the growing and increasingly diverse residents of the County. The North Avenue Corridor Study began in March 2013 and was one of the first projects to benefit from these new tools.

New projects present opportunities to adjust public engagement strategies – building from successes and learning from challenges, but also tailoring the outreach goals to the project’s unique circumstances. The North Avenue Corridor Study was a recommendation of the 2011 Transportation Plan and evaluated the corridor from a Complete Streets perspective to provide for safe, inviting, and convenient travel. Since the project was initiated by the DPW and not at the request of the community, Council, or administration, the planning team acknowledged the need for strong public outreach, varied strategies, and new opportunities to reach and engage the North End community.

New strategies included:

-) guidance to the Advisory Committee about their role, allowing them to be very active participants and encouraging more information-sharing outside of Committee meetings;
-) targeted outreach through focus groups to counter the difficulties that evening meetings pose for some residents and to reach underrepresented stakeholders;
-) an online feedback tool; and
-) supplemental events and visioning led by partner agencies.

For the Pilot Project, even more new strategies were tested, including:

-) a Task Force for the community to co-lead the process;
-) two comprehensive public opinion surveys; and
-) a presence at other community events. Over the course of the Corridor Study’s 2-year process, the planning team attended 11 community meetings and augmented meetings with an online, map-based input tool. Immediately following the Corridor Study, the planning team then attended at least 48 community meetings and augmented public input with online/paper surveys over the 2-year process of Pilot Project development and installation.

Our most recent planning efforts will help improve future Corridor Studies:

KNOWN OUTREACH CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE STUDES
Corridor Study processes can be confusing and overwhelming for the community.	Change the Corridor Study scope to either:

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Simplify the scope of work for only high-level analysis and visioning; or 2) Broaden the scope of work to include full scoping of known issues.
Stakeholders and Committee members should have clear roles and boundaries at public meetings.	Keep public meetings open and inviting, allowing everyone an opportunity to speak and distributing materials provided by others during a dedicated place and time in the meeting.
Traditional evening meetings often exclude many residents.	Continue to use the CCRPC's and the City's Engagement Plans when a project is initiated. This should clearly articulate engagement challenges and identify strategies to limit those barriers.
Capacity may restrict outreach opportunities.	If identified as a need during project initiation, pursue funding, sufficient timelines, and/or people to lead additional outreach.
Outreach lead by others may target specific groups or specific messaging.	If using outside assistance for outreach, ensure proper training and buy-in from the full project team.
Outreach expectations of project-area Councilors may differ with those from project staff.	Decisions from periodic meetings between project staff and project-area Councilors should be captured in writing and agreed to by both parties.

Next Steps

The Public Engagement Plan will benefit from sufficient time to incorporate feedback from the September 13, 2017 TEUC meeting and a full review by other departments and everyone involved in public outreach within DPW. Staff is committed to bringing forward a well-developed plan that will guide the Department's work for years into the future. As a result, we would respectfully request an additional month to complete this work. We propose bringing a final draft to the TEUC's October meeting and having the TEUC subsequently report to the full City Council.

Please don't hesitate to contact any of us with questions or feedback over the coming weeks. Thank you.