

Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)

Equitable
Community
Engagement
Evaluation

Community Engagement Department

Table of Contents

3	Introduction
4	Evaluation Plan
7	Case Studies: Equitable Community Engagement at Different Budget Levels
7	Case Study 1: An Open Space Plan with Limited Engagement Budget
9	Case Study 2: Zoning Update with Sizable Engagement Budget
12	Case Study 3: Municipal Master Plan with Significant Engagement Budget
16	Summary of Case Studies
16	Findings
16	The Value-Add of Community Engagement
19	Barriers and Limitations to Conducting Equitable Community Engagement
22	Recommendations
22	Community Engagement Team Process Improvements
26	Evaluation Data Gathering Tools
27	Future Evaluations
29	Conclusion
30	Staff and Acknowledgements
31	Appendix
31	Evaluation Research Methodology
34	Community Engagement Department Theory of Change
39	Case Studies Summary Table
43	Project Debrief Reflection Template



Introduction

One of the main roles of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) Community Engagement Department is to support municipalities in their efforts to equitably integrate community members' input in policy and planning projects. This pilot evaluation is intended to help the Department reflect, learn, and further this objective. While evaluation practices have not commonly been applied in participatory planning contexts, the MAPC Community Engagement Department's goals and claims regarding equity in their work merits inquiry and examination.

Nearly every project that MAPC takes on requires some degree of community engagement. Although the planning profession did not always value the experiences or knowledge of the general public, most planners today are committed to avoiding repeating past harms by involving community members in policy and planning in an equitable manner. However, many planning departments still struggle with effectively implementing equitable community engagement, whether from lack of technical experience, capacity, or other factors. The MAPC Community Engagement Department seeks to fill these gaps, and the following evaluation serves as a base for understanding how the Department is faring in this endeavor.

This study takes evaluation to be an *“empowering process that enables us to create our path forward together, helps us ‘walk the talk’ of our highest values, and allows us to share the story of our work in ways that are not only accurate but also authentic”* ([Imagining America](#)). The evaluation will not only to be a tool for assessing the value and impact of the Department's work, but also to serve as an opportunity for staff to reflect on their efforts to “walk the talk” of equitable community engagement. In addition to this report, another output of this study will be tools and processes for more consistent reflection and data-gathering about Community Engagement projects that staff can use for smaller-scale evaluation efforts and can serve as building blocks for future evaluations.



Evaluation Plan

This evaluation seeks to understand how the Department’s current work aligns with its stated definition of equitable community engagement. While the Department has been using this approach in its work for many years, there has yet to be an effort to systematically assess how closely the Department’s actual work follows its stated model. As such, this study addresses the question, “*How effectively is the MAPC Community Engagement Department implementing its model of equitable community engagement?*” It focuses on demonstrating the fidelity between the Department’s stated model of community engagement, which can be seen in its Theory of Change in the [Appendix](#), and the community engagement implemented in planning projects. Ultimately, the Department hopes to conduct impact evaluations that can substantiate its logic model and support the claim that equitable community engagement results in more just, fair, and equitable conditions in the MAPC region (Figure 1). Such large-scale impact evaluations will only be possible after the consistency of the team’s work is shown through evaluations like this one.



Figure 1. Logic model for MAPC Community Engagement Department’s community engagement work process.

The research question will be investigated across three case examples from each of the budget levels that the Department uses to classify projects (see [Appendix](#)). Given the study’s focus on the implementation of equitable processes, budget level is an important component, which is why it is set as the independent variable in this study. Compared to other dimensions of the Community Engagement Department’s work, the budget of a project has the greatest impact on staff members’ capacity to implement equitable community engagement. At each of these levels, the ways in which Community Engagement staff advocate for equity in their work will differ. The three projects also allow for a comparison of different challenges to conducting equitable community engagement when provided with varying levels of resources or budget. More details on the evaluation methodology can be seen in Figure 2 below and in the [Appendix](#) of the document.

Evaluation Aim: Assess the Community Engagement Department’s effectiveness at implementing equitable community engagement through three case studies.

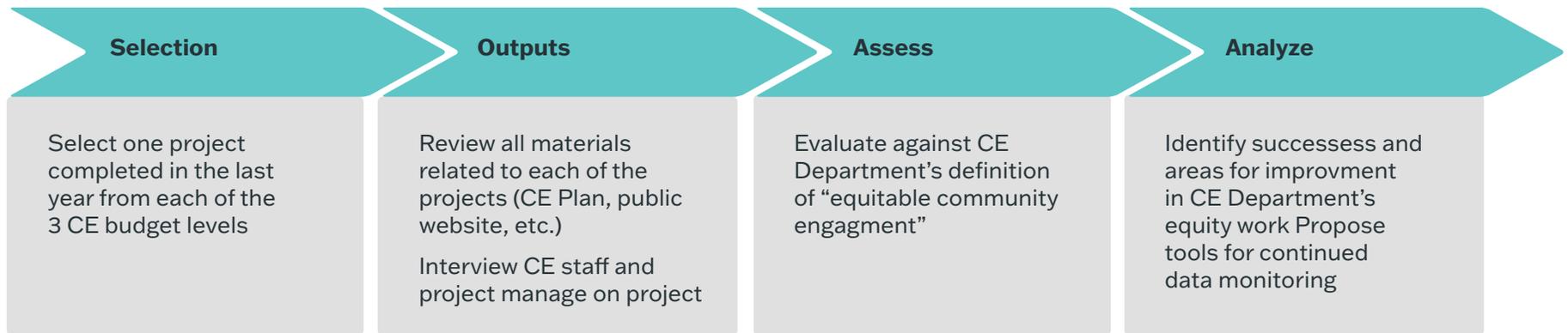


Figure 2. Summary of this study’s methodological approach.

It is important to note that this study was conducted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, so all three projects were affected by the shift to virtual community engagement. Additionally, these projects occurred concurrently with, or began soon after, the racial justice uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. These were unique conditions to work in for the Department. Yet, at the same time, the case studies show how the team navigated these challenges with characteristic ingenuity and adaptability. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve and new challenges arise in the region and across the world, the conditions in which the Community Engagement team worked on the three featured case study projects may prove to be useful to examine and learn from, despite the unique context they are situated in.

The following sections in this report provide descriptions of the three case study projects, including overviews of each stage of the community engagement process. Following this section, the themes, commonalities, and differences among the case studies will be summarized in the Findings section. Finally, the Findings will lead into recommendations for how to conduct evaluation more systematically in the Department and suggestions for improving the team's work.



Case Studies:

Equitable Community Engagement at Different Budget Levels

Case Study 1: An Open Space Plan with Limited Engagement Budget

Project Background: In 2021 MAPC partnered with a town on the north shore of Massachusetts to create an Open Space Plan for the community. This plan had a sizable budget, but the amount dedicated to community engagement was limited; the Community Engagement team was also not initially invited to staff the project. Mid-way through the plan development process, the project manager realized that he needed support with community engagement. The residents who had participated in the process up to that point — including those who attended forums and filled out surveys — were not representative of the town’s diversity. The project manager decided to add some focus groups to give non-English speakers the opportunity to provide input into the Open Space Plan. He requested additional funding, as well as support from the Community Engagement team.

Community Engagement Planning: The Community Engagement staff person’s primary responsibility was to help administer the focus groups. While he did not take part in creating the overall outreach and engagement strategy, the Community Engagement staff person created and implemented a detailed plan for the additional focus groups.

Case Study 1:

- Open Space Plan with Limited Engagement Budget
- Town Population: ~30,000
- Project Budget: ~\$40,000
 - ◊ Budget for Engagement: ~\$5,000
- Engagement Tasks: Conduct focus groups to reach more diverse and representative community members
- Total Number of Level 1 Projects Community Engagement Dept. Completed in FY2022: 4
 - ◊ Level 1 projects have budgets of less than \$10,000. Usually, the Community Engagement team’s role on level 1 projects is limited, as the scope of the outreach and engagement work is predetermined.

The initial plan for the focus groups was to connect with three constituencies: youth, Spanish and Portuguese speakers, and affordable housing residents. The Community Engagement staff person took on much of the logistical planning, including managing relationships with community partners (e.g., the school superintendent, the language class providers), preparing facilitation guides for the focus groups, adapting the survey questions to the focus group setting, and generally managing logistics. As a result, the project manager was able to have more capacity to focus on other portions of the project.

Community Engagement Implementation: Ultimately, the Open Space Plan team only conducted focus groups with Spanish and Portuguese language speakers. The MAPC team partnered with a local organization that provides language classes to Spanish and Portuguese speakers. The focus groups were conducted during the organization’s regular class time to ensure accessibility and attendance. Each of the focus groups had two notetakers, including one who spoke Spanish but took notes in English. This was helpful in capturing more perspectives and a more nuanced understanding of participants’ contributions.

Other partners that the Community Engagement staff reached out to for connections to youth and affordable housing residents did not respond or were unable to accommodate MAPC’s requests. There was also lack of budget and capacity (the Community Engagement team was short-staffed at the time) to pursue these focus groups.

Still, the limited number of focus groups meant that the team was able to provide gift cards as compensation to the focus group participants. These gift cards were shared with participants via email after the virtual focus group sessions, and the gift cards featured online activation pages that were in English. This proved to be a challenge



for non-English speakers who formed the majority of participants in the focus groups. In hindsight, the Community Engagement staff shared that physical gift cards would have been preferable, particularly for people that did not have emails or undocumented participants.

Incorporating Input into Final Plan: The Community Engagement staff summarized the themes from the focus groups in a memo to share with the project manager. Beyond providing the summary memo, the Community Engagement staff person was not involved in the incorporation of the community engagement findings during the drafting of the final plan document. However, the project manager noted that the feedback from the focus groups generally aligned with the responses they had received from previous engagement opportunities, like the surveys and forums.

Case Study 2: Zoning Update with Sizable Engagement Budget

Project Background: The Community Engagement Department was asked to support a zoning update project led by the MAPC Housing team. The project comprised multiple phases, one of which was dedicated to engagement. The Community Engagement staff person assigned to this project joined the project only for the engagement-focused phase. This project faced unexpected pushback from residents who opposed the involvement of MAPC based on their understanding of the agency's mission and agenda. The project manager and Community Engagement staff worked together with the municipality to address these challenges.

Case Study 2:

- Zoning Update with Sizable Engagement Budget
- Town Population: ~33,000
- Project Budget: ~\$80,000
 - ◊ Budget for Engagement: ~\$17,000
- Engagement Tasks: Create a Community Engagement Strategy, including a stakeholder analysis; two public forums; four focus groups; tabling at community events
- Total Number of Level 2 Projects Community Engagement Dept. Completed in FY2022: 2
 - ◊ Level 2 projects have budgets between \$10,000 and \$50,000. These projects typically include some outreach and engagement activities that the Community Engagement staff are asked to design and implement.

Community Engagement Planning: Per the MAPC Community Engagement Strategy, the Community Engagement staff person led a stakeholder analysis brainstorming session for the project and used Jamboard to identify local community groups and organizations who could be project partners. The stakeholder analysis focused more on segmenting the community members based on their role or relationship to housing rather than demographic information. The municipal partners —including the town planner, planning director, and communications specialist from the school district— did not have the context to contribute a thorough understanding of marginalized subgroups in the town. The result was a stakeholder analysis section in the Community Engagement Plan that was organized by categories like “renter,” “homeowner,” “developer,” etc.

Based on this stakeholder brainstorm, the staff created a Community Engagement Plan. Parts of the community engagement process were set in the earliest scoping of this project. Initially, the project was scoped by a member of the Housing team who worked with the municipality to decide that there would be two forums, focus groups, and a steering committee. While the forums were open to all, the focus groups were intended to capture perspectives that were particularly relevant to this zoning update project. Additionally, a steering committee was conceptualized to build trust with the community by having project information shared by residents rather than municipal or MAPC staff. The Community Engagement staff member drafted the engagement plan and presented it to the project manager, who brought it to the town for approval.

Community Engagement Implementation: The community engagement process ultimately included two forums, four focus groups, and additional tabling at community events. The first forum occurred later in the process than originally planned, due to delays in forming the steering committee. Community members learned about the project and provided feedback in the initial forum. The project team created a survey



that was released at the end of the first forum to collect feedback from attendees. The second forum was intended as a walk-through of the recommendations developed in the zoning update plan, including virtual (Jamboard) and in-person comment boards. Because it was a hybrid event, the Community Engagement staff member's skills and experience with preparing and facilitating events were especially beneficial.

Four focus groups were held with (1) developers and landlords, (2) small businesses, (3) residents, and (4) service providers who work with diverse constituencies in town. The first focus group, business and property owners, would be directly impacted by any zoning changes, so the project team wanted to ensure they heard about the project directly and early in the process. Focus groups were also conducted with housing-related service providers to understand the landscape of housing needs and demand for services in town, as well as developers, who would be eventually implementing the updated zoning. The focus groups were planned at times that were appropriate for the participants, whether during the workday or in the evening. The focus group questions, while generally consistent, were tailored to each group. The questions sought to gather input on opportunities or challenges that participants saw for housing and economic development. The project manager facilitated these focus groups; Community Engagement staff and other Housing team members involved in the project took notes.

The role of the steering committee was more compressed than originally planned. Because the town wanted the steering committee to represent the community's perspective in this project, they selected four town councilors (all members of the economic development subcommittee), two members of the planning board, and one member of the zoning board of appeals. Despite being representative of the community, the steering committee's reach in getting the word out about the project was limited.



The inclusion of the elected officials meant that the steering committee meetings needed to be open and reserve time for public comment, thus restricting the amount of time the MAPC team had to present materials and hear from the steering committee.

After the completion of the planned forums and focus groups, the Community Engagement staff person continued to take part in the project team, consulting on the engagement perspective, for the duration of the project. These conversations resulted in adding an engagement touchpoint that was not originally scoped in the project at one of the town's local festivals. MAPC staff attended the event and worked a table to present updated recommendations and development scenarios. This session was intended to provide information on the progress of the project, rather than to solicit feedback.

Incorporating Input into Final Plan: Because community engagement was the focus of this stage of the project, the project manager was involved directly in a lot of the community engagement and input opportunities. As such, the Community Engagement staff was able to pass on notes from the forums and focus groups to the project manager directly rather than writing a memo synthesizing findings or identifying themes. As of the time of writing this report, the project is entering the third phase, where the input gathered through the engagement process will be reflected in a finalized set of recommendations.

Case Study 3: Municipal Master Plan with Significant Engagement Budget

Project Background: Master planning processes typically span multiple years and are heavily based in community input. This was the case for the third case study, which featured extensive involvement from Community Engagement. This master plan began before the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice uprisings of 2020 and continued through these



global and local upheavals. As a result, this project required a great deal of creative thinking and pivoting, especially from the community engagement perspective.

Community Engagement Planning: The Community Engagement staff person assigned to this master plan was involved throughout the project. Starting with the stakeholder analysis process, the Community Engagement staff worked with the project manager and other MAPC staff on the team to compile demographic information about town residents, focusing on identifying marginalized groups and environmental justice communities. The stakeholder list was shared with the town staff to understand whether the demographic analysis was correct and to identify community groups and organizations who could act as partners in this project. The Community Engagement team member provided a lot of additional capacity to do the stakeholder identification work and connect with community organizations that allowed the project team to reach conventionally underrepresented groups. The project team would not otherwise have had the time or resources to conduct such in-depth stakeholder analysis. The project manager and Community Engagement staff worked together to develop a multi-phased community engagement strategy that was structured to ensure the project manager and other planners on the team would be able to receive the input necessary at each stage of the project to write the plan. Initially, the community engagement plan included events like visioning workshops, open houses, focus groups, popping up at local events, surveys, and ongoing engagement such as a newsletter and master plan committee. These plans were adapted to fit a virtual environment when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Due to these circumstances, this master plan's

Case Study 3:

- Municipal Master Plan with Significant Engagement Budget
- Town Population: ~25,000
- Project Budget: ~\$175,000
 - ◊ Budget for Engagement: ~\$25,000
- Engagement Tasks: Create a Community Engagement Strategy, including a stakeholder analysis; outreach working group; focus groups; communications and public awareness campaign; public forums; piloting virtual and hybrid engagement methodologies
- Total Number of Level 3 Projects Community Engagement Dept. Completed in FY2022: 2
 - ◊ Level 3 projects have budgets that are more than \$50,000. On these projects, Community Engagement staff are usually allocated sufficient time and resources to scope, plan, and implement more extensive outreach and engagement strategies.

community engagement process became a testing ground for experimental and flexible methods. For example, the Community Engagement team used the master plan final draft launch event as an opportunity to pilot a hybrid meeting and event approach, as the region emerged from the initial peak of COVID-19. The team referred to the community engagement plan - though they admitted it was not as often as they would have liked — as a grounding document throughout the project. They returned to the demographic information to check the representativeness of their outreach results and adapted the engagement methods to the virtual environment.

Community Engagement Implementation: From the two-year span of this community engagement process, a few key components are worth highlighting.

- *Outreach working group:* In addition to the master plan committee, the Community Engagement staff member formed an outreach-focused working group that helped the project team reach more community members. This working group also provided additional capacity for conducting the outreach work, which was unique to this project.
- *Demographic polling:* Each of the engagement opportunities in this project included some collection of demographic data, whether at the end of surveys or polls during the forums. This allowed the team to track whether it was reaching a representative set of community members by comparing against the demographic data collected in the stakeholder analysis process and neighborhood distribution. The team added on focus groups to the engagement plan in response to gaps it identified in the demographic data from the larger-scale methods like the forums and survey.
- *Focus groups:* The Community Engagement staff person conducted anonymous focus groups with people of color in the town to understand their perspectives, which were not captured in other modes of engagement. These participants' identities were kept confidential to allow them to speak candidly in what was



a racially charged atmosphere at the time - both in the town and across the United States - in response to the murder of George Floyd. The Community Engagement staff member reported the focus group's anonymized feedback to the project team in a memo, which showed that the participants overwhelmingly agreed with the feedback provided by the previous events and meetings' respondents. The focus groups resulted in additional, targeted goals in certain areas, such as adding a point about equitable internet access in the final plan.

- *Poster campaign:* Upon realizing that the switch to virtual meetings was limiting the master plan project's reach among residents, the project team sought to do something that would broaden awareness. They decided to launch a poster campaign to get the word out to residents beyond those who checked the town website.

Incorporating Input into Final Plan: Aside from the anonymous focus groups the Community Engagement staff conducted, the full project team was involved in collecting the feedback received through community engagement, whether by receiving topical input at the open houses or contributing questions to the surveys. Because community engagement was so tightly woven into the project, the project manager was responsible for collating the engagement results and sharing them with the relevant specialists. Rather than working in a silo, the Community Engagement staff provided her perspective on engagement implications throughout the project, suggesting ways to make the process more transparent, engaging, accessible, or in-tune with the community's needs. The final plan document included a section outlining all of the community engagement activities that the team undertook, which is featured at the beginning of the "Introduction" section.



Summary of Case Studies

These three case studies provide an overview of what is possible when implementing the Community Engagement Department's model of equitable community engagement across different budget levels. While the level 1 Open Space project was a targeted, short-term request, the level 3 master plan project fully integrated engagement into the planning process. **Each of these cases were also assessed using the metrics listed in the Department's Theory of Change, which can be seen in the [Appendix of this report](#).** While this evaluation is primarily based on qualitative data to help the Community Engagement team clarify and affirm its work processes, the metrics-based evaluation approach is demonstrated in limited form in this study and can be expanded in future evaluation endeavors.

Findings

The Value-Add of Community Engagement

One of the goals of this research was to help the Community Engagement team better articulate the value it brings to projects at MAPC. A few clear benefits of the Community Engagement team's involvement arose from this study. Overall, Community Engagement staff help by playing three major roles on project teams:

1. The advisory role for strategy setting related to equity and community engagement,
2. The relationship management role, including interpersonal skills and ongoing relationship building, and
3. The technical expert role, adding technical capacity for implementing engagement activities to the team.



The Advisory Role

As an advisor, the Community Engagement staff member not only implements the community engagement activities, but also helps to direct a project with engagement and equity concerns in mind. Project managers reflected on their appreciation for how Community Engagement staff brought their expertise, knowledge, and experience to guide the projects. For example, the Level 3 master plan’s project manager shared that throughout the Community Engagement staff’s involvement in the project, such as meetings with the town and master plan committee, she helped the team strategically orient toward community engagement. Similarly, the Level 2 zoning project’s Community Engagement staff person provided her perspective on equitable engagement practices in weekly meetings. Toward the end of that project, her consultation resulted in the decision to add community engagement opportunities, such as tabling at the town’s local festival. **The Community Engagement team is in a unique position of advising and enabling project teams to equitably center community members in policy and planning work.** Though engagement staff do not have decision-making authority, the team influences projects by leading with and clearly stating its priorities, such as equity, in this advisory role.

In the three case studies, the Community Engagement staff member holds the responsibility for being attentive to equity and engagement concerns throughout the project. The community engagement lead in the Level 3 master plan project was the most integrated with the overall project planning. “She attended all the internal meetings with the town and client and watched the process from the perspective of community engagement,” the project manager said. “She would pump the brakes at times and take the ideas that were being talked about and make them better, more transparent, more engaging, or in tune with the community.” In some cases, Community Engagement staff found they lacked capacity to maintain the attentiveness to how



equitably the engagement process was being implemented. Holding a project team to a standard for equitable engagement and planning is a heavy load to carry. The team — and the agency as a whole — should consider how to redistribute and systematize this responsibility across team members in all project work.

The Relationship Management Role

Community Engagement staff’s interpersonal and relationship management skills play key roles in moving forward policy and planning projects that are dependent on community partnerships. Community engagement staff often borrow tactics from community organizing, such as coalition-building and community mobilization, and applying them in municipal engagement contexts. While these practices were more difficult to implement in a virtual setting, Community Engagement staff nonetheless aim to leave municipal partners more capable of implementing equitable community engagement than when the project started. Organizing-inspired and other engagement practices focus heavily on relationships, which staff members develop over time in project work and through their roles in subregional coordination. Each of the members on the Community Engagement team (as of writing in June 2022) is involved in some way with the MAPC subregions, either through directly managing one or supporting the engagement across a group of them. For example, the Community Engagement staff on the Level 1 Open Space project mentioned that his experience as the Sub-regional Coordinator for the region the town was in meant that he already had a level of familiarity with the community when he started worked on the project. The relationships and interpersonal skills this Community Engagement staff person brought to the open space plan exemplify how Community Engagement staff’s interpersonal skills and ongoing relationship building often support projects in important, though sometimes intangible ways. The Community Engagement staff on these three projects played the role of conveners of municipal staff and constituents, connectors between the project team to networks in the community, and holders of key, long-term relationships.



The Technical Expert Role

In addition to strategy setting, Community Engagement staff play an important technical role in planning and implementing outreach and engagement. When a Community Engagement staff member was involved, project managers reported feeling a sense of trust that Engagement staff would take care of all the logistical planning for an event or meeting. **By taking responsibility for the technical details, Community Engagement staff gave project managers more time and mental space to focus on developing content or administrative direction of the project.** One of the project managers said, “Where community engagement was extremely helpful was providing extra capacity. Being the project manager, I’m working on several aspects of the project, and not having to think about opening up the meeting and running the slides allowed me to focus.” Additionally, the Community Engagement team is afforded more time and capacity to think through and solve engagement-related challenges than other project staff. For example, the master plan project provided a testing ground for Community Engagement staff to develop hybrid meeting practices. Community Engagement staff develop their technical expertise through consideration, practice, and time.

Barriers and Limitations to Conducting Equitable Community Engagement

The barriers and limitations that Community Engagement staff and project managers experienced in implementing the MAPC model of equitable community engagement occurred across the processes and differed based on the project level. This section will discuss the main challenges that staff face at each of the stages of the community engagement process before summarizing the differences between the project levels.



Stakeholder Identification: Gap in Power Analysis

One of the most important steps of the community engagement process is stakeholder analysis: understanding demographically and relationally who comprises the municipality and community in which the project is set. The Community Engagement Department's theory of change recognizes different levels of power among community members, whether due to structural inequities or historical marginalization. As contractors with municipal governments, MAPC staff are not positioned to make decisions on repairing harms created through past policies and plans. However, the agency's recommendations are taken seriously, and the Community Engagement team's efforts are recognized for their focus on the equitable inclusion of community members' voices in municipalities' decision-making. To uphold this reputation, it is important for the Community Engagement team to get stakeholder power analysis right.

While project staff seem to hold an awareness of power disparities in mind throughout projects, the concept is not explicitly addressed or delineated in community engagement plans. The Engagement Strategy Charts that are standard to community engagement strategy documents acknowledge that certain demographic groups within a community may face more barriers to participate in outreach or engagement. However, **the Department should consider more explicit acknowledgements of power dynamics and ways to address them in an updated community engagement plan.**



Strategy Development and Implementation: Lack of Capacity

Across all levels and project stages, the Community Engagement staff reported challenges with lack of time and capacity. The projects featured in this study occurred in FY2021, during which two members of the Community Engagement team moved on to new roles. As a result, the two remaining specialists took on additional projects, adding to the strain of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the Community Engagement staff expressed that a lack of capacity due to the number of projects they were working on made it difficult to fully attend to the equity considerations in each project. The capacity crunch was enhanced by the time constraints related to funding timelines and pivots in reaction to the changing public health guidelines in response to COVID-19. **Staff expressed that they “could have pushed harder for equity” in certain cases but did not feel like they had the capacity to do so.** As discussed in the [previous section](#), Community Engagement staff members play the role of holding up the equity lens on projects. Attentiveness to equity requires a significant amount of unaccounted capacity and mental bandwidth, which was not available to Community Engagement staff in this moment of transition.

Across Project Levels: Different Budgets and Degrees of Integration

The most notable difference between the three projects was the degree to which community engagement was woven into the overall planning process. In the level 3 project, which had the most abundant budget for community engagement, the Community Engagement staff member worked hand-in-hand as a partner with the project manager. She was involved from the beginning of the project and given the bandwidth to proactively design engagement to be equitable and inclusive. As a result, the community input influenced the plan content, and the planning process informed the outreach and engagement. On the other hand, the involvement of Community Engagement staff in the level 1 project was very siloed and reactive. The project was not scoped to allow for support from the Community Engagement Department from



the beginning. Instead, the project manager identified a need for more representative community feedback partway through the project and applied for additional funding to be able to bring on Community Engagement staff for a series of focus groups. While the level 3 project resulted in a plan that highlighted equity in its creation process and content, the level 1 project faced more roadblocks. The project manager reflected that allocating funding for the Community Engagement team to be involved earlier in the process would have been beneficial in his view. **One solution suggested by a project manager was to set a percentage of each project budget to community engagement, similarly to how a percentage is typically set aside for project management.** A more comprehensive analysis of the Community Engagement Department's projects will be necessary to make generalizable claims about the impact of budget level on equity outcomes, as suggested in the [Recommendations-Future Evaluations](#) section.

Recommendations

Community Engagement Team Process Improvements

This evaluation has demonstrated the degree to which the Community Engagement Department faithfully implements its strategy in the three randomly selected case studies. While this case-based approach does not allow for drawing generalizable conclusions, the in-depth analysis of the community engagement model through these three projects will allow the team to refine the Theory of Change and to inform future evaluations.



The Community Engagement Department started articulating its Theory of Change in 2021, documenting its understanding of how the team’s work results in impact or change throughout the MAPC region. The process of refining the Community Engagement team’s Theory of Change continues with this evaluation study. **The findings of this evaluation study suggest that the Department’s Theory of Change should be updated to reflect the benefits of Community Engagement staff’s involvement on a project, such as their role as an advisor in equity and engagement concerns and the value of their interpersonal skills and relationship management.** The barriers and limitations identified could also be bolstered in the Theory of Change to encourage the team to continually improve by recognizing of the effects of different levels of resourcing on projects.

The Department may operationalize these updates to the Theory of Change in their Community Engagement Guide and Plan template. The team uses both of these documents internally on MAPC projects and provides training on them in external settings to planning and community engagement practitioners. The sections below include suggested areas in which the Department should consider updating the Community Engagement Guide and Plan.

Stakeholder and Power Analysis

The Community Engagement Guide and Plan template should provide a clearer link between identifying community demographics, different levels of power among community groups, and outreach and engagement tactics. With the increased focus on equity internally at MAPC and externally across the region, the Guide should be updated to illuminate the considerations and decisions that result in equitable community engagement, which are implicit or ad hoc in the current version. This might require some additional tools or sections in the Guide or Plan template to draw out the linkages between these concepts.



For example, each of the projects reviewed in this study used focus groups to reach marginalized communities that typically do not participate in open forums or online surveys. As such, **the Community Engagement Department might consider adding a section to the Guide and Plan template that leads staff to think through who is excluded by each outreach or engagement activity.** Another update to consider is **reconfiguring how the team presents stakeholder analyses to include power as a factor.** Community engagement plans should explicitly state **(1) who the ultimate decision-maker for a project is, (2) what decisions community members can influence and (3) the constraints that are already set or important to consider.**

Additionally, the Community Engagement team can develop **an inventory of various methods or approaches to outreach and engagement** to summarize the institutional knowledge within the team. The inventory can be a tool for laying out power differentials by including information like when the tactic works best, who is responsive to it, and who typically gets left out. This information can be drawn and summarized from previous experiences, Community Engagement Plans, and the [Qualitative Data Methodology Practice Guide](#). Not only could it be useful to staff when working on future projects, but also as a teaching tool in trainings to new community engagement practitioners. Finally, **the Department’s equitable community engagement approach should be formally adopted by the agency as a public involvement policy to ensure these standards are applied in all MAPC projects.**

Ongoing Relationship Building

The degree to which the Community Engagement staff’s contribution to projects through their relational skills is not reflected in the current Community Engagement Guide and Plan. As seen in the case studies presented in this study, Community Engagement staff draw extensively on both their interpersonal skills and pre-existing relationships to support projects. The benefit that this brings to MAPC project work



should be highlighted and documented to ensure relationships are developed in an ongoing manner. The Community Engagement Department should consider creating a client relationship management (CRM) tool to keep track of relationships developed through projects with local community-based organizations. Even if it is only for the Community Engagement team's use, such institutional knowledge is important to record in a manner that is accessible to the entire team and any new staff who might join in the future. To operationalize this, Community Engagement Staff should make it a priority and a habit to add new contacts to the department's newsletter mailing list in order to track and keep in touch with the team's growing network, integrating this with the CRM. The CRM could have the added benefit of being a way to remind staff to follow-up with partners after the completion of a project to share the results. One way that Community Engagement staff enact their key relationship-management role is through sustaining connections and ensuring community partners feel meaningfully engaged — following up is key to that objective.

Different Tools for Different Levels

It becomes clear when comparing the three projects that their various levels of resource availability resulted in very different types and degrees of engagement. While the current Community Engagement Guide and Plan are geared toward extensive outreach and engagement processes, they might not apply as well to a project with fewer resources for community engagement. **The Community Engagement Department may consider creating versions of the templates and tools it uses for smaller scale projects.** Such guides could also be useful to staff outside of the Community Engagement team who are interested in implementing equitable outreach or engagement independently or do not have sufficient resources to work with a Community Engagement staff person.



Additionally, to ensure that all projects have adequate funds for equitable community engagement, the department should revisit its efforts to **establish guidelines for budgeting**. As one project manager suggested, the Community Engagement Department might **request that a certain percentage of project budgets gets automatically reserved for engagement**. The Department has begun creating budgeting guidelines that can provide a baseline for continued work on this front. In summary, the Community Engagement team should consider dedicating some resources to an update to the Guide and Plan focusing on equity and power analyses, ongoing relationship building, and differentiating by levels of resource availability.

Evaluation Data Gathering Tools

While this study focuses on the Community Engagement Department's processes, future evaluations may seek to understand broader questions like the team's impact on planning outcomes. Before such impact evaluations can be reliably and rigorously conducted, however, the Department must be able to demonstrate that it is consistently implementing its model as described in its Theory of Change. To demonstrate that the Community Engagement Department is reliable and consistently meeting its metrics, some updates and additions should be made to its current project tracking tools.



Project Debrief

While the Community Engagement Department uses AirTable to capture information that should also be recorded. Documenting reflections and lessons at the end of each project will enable the Community Engagement team to learn and grow its work and provide a space to share reflections and practices among team members. A suggested template for such a reflection document can be found in the [Appendix](#), though some key reflection questions are included below. The team may consider filling out these debrief documents with a partner, as talking through the questions may be helpful in drawing out realizations and reflections.

Sample reflection questions to fill out at the end of projects:

- What went well for you in the project?
- What do you wish could have gone differently?
- What would you like to remind your future self or a teammate to do or avoid in upcoming projects?
- Who were some of the partners you worked with on this project that we should keep in mind going forward?

Future Evaluations

The Community Engagement Department is still at the beginning of its evaluation journey. This pilot study has opened the door to assessing whether the team is implementing its stated model and understanding how it could improve. Yet, it only invites further evaluation questions to consider.



Continued process-focused evaluations might ask questions about how consistently the Community Engagement Department implements the components delineated in its Theory of Change. Other questions might consider **the differences in implementing the community engagement process at different budget levels, with different MAPC departments, in partnership with municipalities with differing levels of commitment to equity, or across a number of other factors.**

Once it has been determined that the Community Engagement Department is effectively implementing its stated model, then impact evaluations might be considered. Impact evaluations assess the outcomes of the work being done. In the case of the Community Engagement Department, this might mean **assessing whether projects in which the Department is involved result in more equitable plans and policies, whether they are more likely to be implemented, or whether participants feel more meaningfully engaged in the engagement process.**

Lastly, the Community Engagement Department might consider evaluations focused on other parts of its work. Aside from supporting municipalities as part of cross-MAPC teams, the Department also provides direct technical assistance to municipalities, supports Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion professionals across the region, and delivers trainings and professional development to community engagement practitioners. **These are all aspects of the department's work that merit evaluation to enable reflection, learning, and improvement.**



Conclusion

MAPC’s Community Engagement Department is at the start of an evaluation journey that will prove to be impactful on both its work processes and project outcomes across the region. This report focused on the Community Engagement Department’s internal processes, using three case examples to begin developing an understanding of how closely the team’s work aligns with its stated approach in the Department’s Theory of Change. The findings of this report show that Community Engagement staff play multiple key roles on project teams: advisors on engagement and equity; relationship managers who connect and convene disparate stakeholders; and technical experts that fill capacity and skill needs. With so many roles to play, it may not be surprising to find that Community Engagement staff face barriers in implementing equitable community engagement through these three components of their role. The report recommends that the Department take steps toward more explicitly acknowledging power disparities, their implications, and efforts to prioritize equity in its work. Specific examples and initial drafts of tools are provided to help the Department make these strides. As the Community Engagement Department continues to evolve to meet the needs of the region with the release of the next regional plan, MetroCommon 2050, the tools of evaluation will continue to prove useful in helping the department “walk the talk,” show its work, and advance toward a more equitable region.



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Appendix

Evaluation Research Methodology

The methodological approach for this evaluation is primarily qualitative, consisting of interviews with MAPC Community Engagement Department staff, project managers, and other documentation from each of the selected project case examples. While the overarching evaluation question is “How effectively is the MAPC Community Engagement Department implementing its model of equitable community engagement?” the study addresses it by focusing on the four sub-questions listed below.

- How effectively does the CE team identify and analyze the power of community stakeholders?
- How effectively does the CE team create equitable outreach and engagement plans?
- How effectively does the CE team implement equitable outreach and engagement?
- How effectively does the CE team incorporate equitable engagement results in final deliverables?

To answer each of these four questions, the study collected information about projects as well as additional input from the Community Engagement staff and other project staff on their decision-making process at each of these project phases.



Sampling Process

This evaluation focused on three projects that the MAPC Community Engagement Team worked on in fiscal year 2022, which extended from June 30, 2021 to July 1, 2022. Each project falls in one of the Community Engagement team's three project categories:

- Level 1 projects have budgets of less than \$10,000. Usually, the Community Engagement team's role on level 1 projects is limited, as the scope of the outreach and engagement work is predetermined.
- Level 2 projects have budgets between \$10,000 and \$50,000. These projects typically include some outreach and engagement activities that the Community Engagement staff are asked to design and implement.
- Level 3 projects have budgets that are more than \$50,000. On these projects, Community Engagement staff are usually allocated sufficient time and resources to scope, plan, and implement more extensive outreach and engagement strategies.

This study randomly selected one project from each of the three project levels. The sampling process filtered for projects that fit the following criteria and then randomly selected one project from each of the three levels:

- Projects completed between July 1, 2021 and June 30, 2022 (fiscal year 2022)
- Projects assigned to Community Engagement staff who were members of the team for more than 6 months of the fiscal year
- Non-overlapping project managers and associated departments or divisions



Data Collection Strategies

The data collection approach for this study comprised primarily of semi-structured research interviews, for a post-test only nonexperimental research design. The Community Engagement staff member assigned to each of the selected projects participated in an interview about the process they took to plan and implement equitable community engagement. The project manager for each selected case study also participated in an interview about their experience working with the Community Engagement staff person.

In addition to interviews, data was gathered from internal and external documents related to the three selected projects. Internal documents included the Community Engagement Strategy or Plan document that Community Engagement staff create for most projects. Additional information was found in the Community Engagement project tracker AirTable and the project's scope document.

External documentation on the project was also used, if available. For example, some projects feature a project website that lists the outreach and engagement activities that occurred. This source of information provided an understanding of what outreach and engagement opportunities were publicly shared for each project.

Analysis Plan

The interviews and internal and external documentation were joined together to develop a narrative of each project. These narratives include descriptions of the project goals, community engagement needs, municipal partner, and other basic information. In addition, narratives note the decision-making process at major points in the project and lessons that the Community Engagement staffer learned about the implementation of equitable community engagement.



The interviews and documents were analyzed and coded to identify themes that align with the components of equitable community engagement as defined by MAPC’s Community Engagement team. The coding also identified successes and challenges to implementing equitable community engagement. These themes will be analyzed and compared across the three case studies. Because only one case study within each level is being selected, this report will not be able to make generalizable claims about projects based on the type of budget level. However, the study provides the opportunity to begin comparing projects across different budget levels so that MAPC’s Community Engagement Department can begin to understand how to differentiate the evaluation of projects at each of the budget levels.

Deliverables

This study will result in a final report that describes the three selected case projects and how equitable community engagement was implemented in each. It will also provide recommendations for how to measure equitable community engagement for each level of project, including criteria for each level and new or revised tools.

Community Engagement Department Theory of Change

The following is an excerpt from the Community Engagement Department’s Theory of Change that is relevant to this evaluation project. This study seeks to understand whether the three selected case study projects achieved the objectives and indicators in the Theory of Change. The evaluation will assess the fidelity with which the case studies implemented this community engagement model, and will propose changes or additions to the Theory of Change to ensure the stated model captures the way in which the team achieves its engagement and equity goals.



Goal #1: MAPC and municipal planning staff equitably incorporate community members' perspectives in planning projects through consultation with the Community Engagement Department.

Objective #1: Project teams (MAPC and municipal staff) integrate realistic outreach and engagement timelines into project scopes.

Indicators:

1. MAPC staff reach out to CE staff in the scoping stage of #% of projects to ensure budgetary resources are sufficiently allocated to equitable community engagement activities.
2. MAPC staff create separate budget codes for the community engagement portion of projects in #% of projects.
3. MAPC staff include the Racial Equity Diversity, and Inclusion Statement (REDIS) statement in the scope of #% of projects.
4. MAPC staff articulate a clear purpose to the community engagement in #% of project scopes.



Objective #2: Project teams (MAPC and municipal staff) prioritize historically under-engaged/underserved populations in the engagement strategy.

Indicators:

1. The project team conduct a stakeholder analysis for #% of projects that highlights differential levels of power.
2. CE staff conduct research on historically marginalized community members and include findings in the Community Engagement Plan for #% of projects.
3. The project team agree upon a common definition of “community” and articulate it in the Community Engagement Plan for #% of projects.
4. The Community Engagement Plan describes the types and quantity of input or data needed from the public for #% of projects.
5. The Community Engagement Plan articulates outreach and engagement strategies that are best-suited for the various stakeholder groups in the community for #% of projects.



Objective #3: Project teams (MAPC and municipal staff) work with the Community Engagement Department to collect data from members of the public that is relevant to the project.

Indicators:

1. The project team dedicates resources to engaging community groups proportionally to need (e.g., more outreach to the community groups that were identified as historically excluded or underrepresented).
2. The project team ensures that engagement opportunities are accessible to each of the identifies community stakeholder groups, as articulated in the Community Engagement Plan for #% of projects.
3. The project team provides translation to #% of projects, based on need determined in the Community Engagement Plan.
4. The CE team checks in # times throughout the project to course-correct the outreach and engagement strategy, making sure to adjust as needed to capture the voices of those who have been historically or currently excluded.



Objective #4: Project teams (MAPC and municipal staff) work with the Community Engagement Department to analyze, report on, and incorporate the input into the final deliverable.

Indicators:

1. The CE team produces a summary memo for #% of projects, which analyzes the results of the community engagement process, including addressing comments that are not directly related to the project.
2. The CE team works with MAPC staff to ensure the input gathered through the CE process is included in the final deliverable.
3. The CE team follows-up with #% of stakeholders engaged in the process to ensure the final results are accessible and interpretable for community partners who contributed to the project.

Case Studies Summary Table

The table below summarizes how the three case study projects aligned with the Community Engagement Department’s Theory of Change. Future evaluations may seek to expand on this approach by measuring the percentage of all projects Community Engagement staff worked on in a fiscal year that meet each of the metrics defined under the “Indicators.”

Theory of Change Indicators	Case Study 1: Open Space Plan	Case Study 2: Zoning Update	Case Study 3: Master Plan
Objective #1: Project teams (MAPC and municipal staff) integrate realistic outreach and engagement timelines into project scopes.			
Indicator: MAPC staff reach out to CE staff in the scoping stage of projects to ensure budgetary resources are sufficiently allocated to equitable community engagement activities.	Did not occur in this project	CE staff were brought on at the beginning of the relevant phase	CE staff were involved from the beginning of the project
Indicator: MAPC staff create separate budget codes for the community engagement portion of projects.	No	Yes	Yes
Indicator: MAPC staff include the Racial Equity Diversity, and Inclusion Statement (REDIS) statement in the scope of projects.	The three projects featured in this report were scoped prior to the adoption of the REDIS.		
Indicator: MAPC staff articulate a clear purpose to the community engagement.	Yes	Yes	Yes

Theory of Change Indicators	Case Study 1: Open Space Plan	Case Study 2: Zoning Update	Case Study 3: Master Plan
Objective #2: Project teams (MAPC and municipal staff) prioritize historically under-engaged/underserved populations in the engagement strategy.			
Indicator: The project team conducts a stakeholder analysis for the project that highlights differential levels of power.	Stakeholder analysis was conducted, but did not involve CE staff.	Stakeholder analysis was conducted.	Stakeholder analysis was conducted.
Indicator: CE staff conduct research on historically marginalized community members and include findings in the Community Engagement Plan.	Prior knowledge on history of the municipality from subregional work.	Relevant demographic information collected.	Relevant demographic information collected.
Indicator: The project team agree upon a common definition of “community” and articulate it in the Community Engagement Plan.	Not explicitly defined	Not explicitly defined	Not explicitly defined
Indicator: The Community Engagement Plan describes the types and quantity of input or data needed from the public.	Determined by project manager prior to Community Engagement involvement	Yes – Listed purpose of each engagement activity in the plan document	Yes – agreed upon between project manager and Community Engagement lead for each planning stage
Indicator: The Community Engagement Plan articulates outreach and engagement strategies that are best-suited for the various stakeholder groups in the community.	Yes	Yes	Yes

Theory of Change Indicators	Case Study 1: Open Space Plan	Case Study 2: Zoning Update	Case Study 3: Master Plan
Objective #3: Project teams (MAPC and municipal staff) work with the Community Engagement Department to collect data from members of the public that is relevant to the project.			
<p>Indicator: The project team dedicates resources to engaging community groups proportionally to need (e.g., more outreach to the community groups that were identified as historically excluded or underrepresented).</p> <p>*This indicator requires more thorough analysis of project budgets than was possible in this study.</p>	<p>Yes – Community Engagement was brought in after the project manager asked for additional funding to reach under-engaged groups</p>	<p>Yes – Allocated resources for focus groups with service providers, though lacked scope to speak with historically underrepresented community members directly</p>	<p>Yes – Dedicated resources for focus groups with conventionally marginalized communities</p>
<p>Indicator: The project team ensures that engagement opportunities are accessible to each of the identified community stakeholder groups, as articulated in the Community Engagement Plan.</p>	<p>Yes – Focus groups planned at a time that was convenient to participants</p>	<p>Yes – Timing of focus groups was considered; provided in-person and hybrid meeting options</p>	<p>Yes – Provided a range of access options despite challenges of COVID</p>
<p>Indicator: The project team provides translation, based on need determined in the Community Engagement Plan.</p>	<p>Yes – Focus groups conducted in Spanish and Portuguese</p>	<p>Need not determined in Community Engagement Plan</p>	<p>Yes – Translated outreach materials and content based on demographics</p>
<p>Indicator: The CE team checks in throughout the project to course-correct the outreach and engagement strategy, making sure to adjust as needed to capture the voices of those who have been historically or currently excluded.</p>	<p>Not applicable – short project duration</p>	<p>Yes – added community engagement touchpoints later in project progression</p>	<p>Yes – Not as much as ideal, due to COVID, but updated engagement plan for pandemic conditions</p>

Theory of Change Indicators	Case Study 1: Open Space Plan	Case Study 2: Zoning Update	Case Study 3: Master Plan
Objective #4: Project teams (MAPC and municipal staff) work with the Community Engagement Department to analyze, report on, and incorporate the input into the final deliverable.			
Indicator: The CE team produces a summary memo, which analyzes the results of the community engagement process, including addressing comments that are not directly related to the project.	Yes – Summarized focus groups’ input	No – Project manager was embedded in engagement process, so summary was unnecessary	Yes – Summary provided for anonymous focus groups; other community input was summarized by project manager directly
Indicator: The CE team works with MAPC staff to ensure the input gathered through the CE process is included in the final deliverable.	No – Budget not available	Yes – Played an advisory role on engagement component	Yes – Engagement was intertwined with plan content writing
Indicator: The CE team follows-up with stakeholders engaged in the process to ensure the final results are accessible and interpretable for community partners who contributed to the project.	No – Budget not available	Yes – Suggested tabling at local festival to share plan recommendations back with the public	Yes – Hybrid celebration event to share full draft with community



Project Debrief Reflection Template

CE Staff Name:

Today's Date:

Project Title:

Project Manager:

Actual Start Date:

Actual End Date:

Instructions: Congratulations on helping another regional partner to implement an equitable community engagement process! Now, take a deep breath, maybe find a buddy, and spend some time reflecting on your experience. Go through the questions below with the project you've just completed in mind. Remember that these reflections are meant to help yourself and the Community Engagement team capture insights, lessons learned, and nuggets of wisdom so we can continue improving our work and our impact!

Reflection Questions:

1. What went well for you in this project?
2. What do you wish could have gone differently?
 - a. Were there any contextual barriers that affected the things you just listed?
3. What would you like to remind your future self or a teammate to do or avoid in upcoming projects?
4. Who were some of the partners you worked with on this project that we should keep in mind going forward?
5. Does the project manager have any reflections or feedback to share?

Project Debrief Checklist:

Yes • No • Comments or Elaboration, if desired

MAPC staff reach out to CE staff in the scoping stage of projects to ensure budgetary resources are sufficiently allocated to equitable community engagement activities.

MAPC staff create separate budget codes for the community engagement portion of projects.

MAPC staff include the Racial Equity Diversity, and Inclusion Statement (REDIS) statement in the scope of projects.

MAPC staff articulate a clear purpose to the community engagement.

The project team conducts a stakeholder analysis for the project that highlights differential levels of power.

CE staff conduct research on historically marginalized community members and include findings in the Community Engagement Plan.

Project Debrief Checklist:

Yes • No • Comments or Elaboration, if desired

The project team agree upon a common definition of “community” and articulate it in the Community Engagement Plan.

The Community Engagement Plan describes the types and quantity of input or data needed from the public.

The project team dedicates resources to engaging community groups proportionally to need (e.g., more outreach to the community groups that were identified as historically excluded or underrepresented).

The project team ensures that engagement opportunities are accessible to each of the identified community stakeholder groups, as articulated in the Community Engagement Plan.

The project team provides translation, based on need determined in the Community Engagement Plan.

Project Debrief Checklist:

Yes • No • Comments or Elaboration, if desired

The CE team checks in throughout the project to course-correct the outreach and engagement strategy, making sure to adjust as needed to capture the voices of those who have been historically or currently excluded.

The CE team produces a summary memo, which analyzes the results of the community engagement process, including addressing comments that are not directly related to the project.

The CE team works with MAPC staff to ensure the input gathered through the CE process is included in the final deliverable.

The CE team follows-up with stakeholders engaged in the process to ensure the final results are accessible and interpretable for community partners who contributed to the project.