



ARAPAHOE COUNTY

Community Engagement Planning Guide

DRAFT

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Commissioners' Office
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Introduction

As our world becomes more and more connected—and more and more virtual—it's important to know how residents and stakeholders feel about Arapahoe County and the many programs and services we offer. To ensure we act in the best interest of our constituents, it's vital to engage residents on a regular basis: from large commissioner town halls to small focus groups on specific capital projects. Engaging with—and listening to—our stakeholders ensures that we are creating and maintaining services that are important for maintaining a high quality of life.

Our role in the community

Whether they've been here a couple of months or their entire lives, Arapahoe County residents realize that their community provides the best of everything Colorado has to offer. From babies to boomers and beyond, our residents put down roots, raise families, start and run businesses, and embrace the endless opportunities and amenities that Colorado has to offer.

The Arapahoe County government serves its communities in ways both obvious and obscure. As the beating heart of local and regional government, we're here for our neighbors on their best days—and their worst. County officials and employees share our residents' goals of preserving our quality of life, whether urban, suburban or rural, on our roads or on our trails, at home or at work. By establishing practices that are mindful of our history and anticipate our future, Arapahoe County strives to be the place we're proud to call home.

This community engagement planning guide was created to help Arapahoe County departments and offices identify and plan for stakeholder engagement opportunities. It helps employees better understand the need for engagement as well as the tools and techniques available for engaging stakeholders at every step of a project.

Resident engagement is consistent with the Arapahoe County Strategic Plan. Providing opportunities to listen and react to resident and stakeholder feedback is an important part of all County services. Listening to our residents helps us better understand and respond to what residents value and helps to develop and preserve a culture of inclusion and connectedness. Successful engagement helps build trust with our communities and demonstrates a commitment to transparency and integrity.

For additional information or to begin an engagement process, start with your communications business partner. These professionals are trained in engagement techniques and can help you develop a plan that captures public sentiment and ideas at every turn.

Definitions

Community Engagement

Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with individuals and community groups to address issues that might impact the well-being of those groups. It seeks to better engage the community to achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes, processes, relationships, discourse, decision-making and/or implementation.

Community engagement is characterized by the use of a variety of tools and philosophies that enlist the public in understanding, thinking about, influencing and contributing to County initiatives, plans, actions, decisions and processes. Community engagement can inform community members about County matters, help people understand how and why decisions are made, give people a voice in the community, and enlist help in shaping decisions. Arapahoe County uses a variety of tools that residents use for requests, inquiries, complaints and input.

This flow of information is most effective when it works both ways and there is a broad and diverse participation with varying viewpoints and perspectives. Engagement methods that can be easily skewed by the efforts of special interest groups should be carefully evaluated or monitored, as results will not typically reflect the opinions of the overall community. Engagement efforts should not be expected to represent a clear majority as an official vote of the people.* (Source: Penn State Center for Economic and Community Development)

Listening

Listening is an active form of engagement, whether the engagement is formal or informal, in-person or virtual, in a County facility or on the street. Active listening means putting aside your own ideas, outcomes and suggestions and placing your attention on the individual or group in front of you. It involves hearing what people say and giving them verbal or written cues that indicate their contribution has been heard and processed.

Public Participation

Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process. Public participation is the process by which an organization consults with interested or affected individuals, organizations, and government entities before deciding. Public participation is for two-way communication and collaborative problem solving with the goal of achieving better and more acceptable decisions.* (From International Association for Public Participation, ia2.org and Creighton & Creighton, Inc).

Community

The Arapahoe County community includes residents, businesses, visitors, County staff and those affected by decisions made by the County. More than 650,000 people call Arapahoe County “home” while others work, recreate and travel through the County on a regular basis.

Engagement Outcomes

There are multiple reasons to engage community members on a variety of County work projects. These include:

- **Inform the public.** Residents and businesses must be informed of decisions that affect them and a robust public information plan helps keep information flowing to specific stakeholder groups. Informing people is the first step in engagement opportunities.
- **Seek to understand resident and community perspectives.** While County staff and elected officials generally know how residents and stakeholders feel about certain topics, we can always learn more by purposely engaging these groups on specific topics. Engagement opportunities then inform policy through the concrete ideas, concerns and suggestions of constituents.
- **Mine ideas and solutions from residents and communities.** Stakeholders often have lots of ideas on how to solve problems or suggestions on making County life even better. Strategic engagement opportunities help County staff dig deeper into these areas. Involving community members in all phases of a project helps produce better solutions and can help produce more relevant results that might not have emerged without proper engagement.
- **Demonstrate transparency in County decisions, planning, actions and decision-making.** Arapahoe County believes in transparency, as it actively helps citizens and stakeholders understand how and why decisions are made. Transparency is important to garner trust in staff and elected officials, as people are better able to trust a decision when it was clearly outlined, explained, observed and understood.
- **Equip County staff to effectively engage residents and stakeholders.** Engagement strategies and tools change frequently and it's important for Arapahoe County staff to have the proper training and tool selection to engage stakeholders actively and effectively. Regular use of tools helps engagement become an ongoing and active part of all work plans.
- **Enhance collaboration and communication among and between County departments.** Effective internal communication between County departments and elected officials is paramount for engagement and communication to work.

Core values for the practice of public participation

The International Association for Public [Participation](#) lists seven core values for practicing public participation:

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.

6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

Community Engagement Planning

Step 1: Outline project and timeline

As part of the overall project plan, managers should follow several steps:

- Determine why public input is important in the project outcome.
- Identify decision makers and dates when formal decisions will be made, such as Board action. Begin looking at how public engagement can be included before each decision.
- Consider who will be impacted by the project, including residents, neighborhoods, businesses, visitors, commuters, workers and more.
- Decide if you want feedback from the entire community or just for those in affected areas and/or groups.
- Consider using Census data to better determine what specific neighborhoods, groups or residents will be affected. Also determine if multiple languages are important in reaching these groups.

Timing considerations:

Allow a minimum of two weeks' notice for public engagement activities; ideally, a 30-day advance notification is preferred when possible so that community members and other organizations can help spread the word on behalf of the County. (FIG 1 BELOW)

Step 2: Determine level of engagement

There are several levels of community engagement—some will be useful for your project while others will not. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) is a reputable and frequently used resource for government regarding best practices and offers the following range of possibilities for effective engagement.

It is important that the engagement level is part of the initial planning process for a project to best determine what type of conversation is suitable between the County and the public. In consultation with your communication business partner, ask yourself:

- Can we be sure the level of engagement used is appropriate?
- Can the public really have an impact on the project outcome or is the project past the point where feedback would be useful? Re-think the process if public input cannot be used in decision-making.

Desired Result	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
	To provide the public with a look at the full project overview, complete with all documents and details needed to form an educated opinion based on balanced and objective information. All engagement begins with this.	To hear public feedback on the project, alternatives, opportunities, solutions, pros and cons.	To work directly with the public throughout a process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To create smaller groups from the public (i.e. task forces, committees who are at the table with the decision-makers.	To give the public the power to make the final decision. The most common example of this is a vote.
Commitment to Public	We will be transparent and timely in sharing information and updates with the public. We will be sure you know where to go for information and updates.	We will keep you informed and updated through the entirety of the planning process, collect and consider your feedback, and demonstrate how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are heard, considered, and are reflected in the planning process. We will let you know how we used public feedback and how it influenced decisions.	We will look to you for advice, perspective, and innovation in formulating solutions. We will incorporate your suggestions and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what is decided by the majority vote.

Step 3: Identify and notify stakeholders

At this step, you, in consultation with your communication business partner, will narrow down who specifically will find the project interesting and impactful. Also check to see how these plans fit in with other County initiatives, including those from other departments.

Before beginning notifications for an upcoming project, identify your stakeholders. These are most easily identified as anyone who will be impacted by the project. While the broader public should always be informed and included in a project (such as with social media), stakeholder groups are distinct and identifiable lists of people, neighborhoods, businesses, and organizations that are affected by the project and should be specifically engaged. These are also the people who will spend more time and effort contributing to the project.

Who are potential stakeholders?

Here, you're looking for a cross section of the community that should include people of all races, colors, national origins, genders, languages, abilities and income. Expect that your list will grow as the project continues and as others show interest in it. Be flexible in including new stakeholders as they show up. Stakeholders can include:

- Residents (geographic area)
- Business leaders
- Civic organizations
- Community organizations
- Faith-based communities
- Neighborhood associations
- Individuals with disabilities
- Older adults
- Youth and young adults
- Homeowners and/or renters
- Students (K-12 and college)
- Partner organizations
- ESL community
- Underrepresented populations
- Elected officials
- City /town staff and officials

Some clarifying questions:

Who will be impacted positively or negatively?

- Consider geography—who lives, works, plays or commutes in the project area?
- Think about internal stakeholders: staff from other departments, elected officials, Boards and Commissions representatives. Consider adding these as part of your plan.

Who needs to know about the plan?

- Is there a legal requirement?
- Which groups/individuals are directly impacted versus groups indirectly impacted?

Who can or will contribute to the conversation?

- Who are the experts?
- Are there outside resources who can speak to the project/topic?
- What other government agencies have done similar projects and what can we learn from them?

Who could stop this project?

- What is the potential for backlash on a project and who could potentially be negatively impacted?
- It's just as important to hear/understand the oppositional views so they can be addressed.

Who might be hard to reach?

- Specifically identify hard-to-reach stakeholders such as youth, older adults and people with low English proficiency, low incomes and/or disabilities. Collaborate with groups or community based organizations who work with these types of stakeholders to figure out the best ways to reach/engage them. Do these communities need a virtual option or would a virtual option help increase participation?

Remember internal stakeholders!

- The Communications division (communications business partner) should always be kept in the loop on projects. The team also serves as a resource for implementing all stages of engagement.

- Commissioners know their districts well, in addition to the major stakeholders within their districts. They are a great resource for gauging public interest and feedback. They should also be kept apprised of communications disseminated in their district.
- Involve other County departments in your project during the planning phase.
- Remember that many County employees also live in Arapahoe County and may appreciate outreach and news items aimed at them.

Step 4: Provide Background Information

Individuals and groups can only provide input when they have the proper background and information on your project. So, it's important that we make it easy for folks to find project information. Most medium- to large-scale projects in the County will have a project page on the public website that can be linked through other communications, such as social media, emails, posters, etc.

It's important to work with your communication business partner to compile this information in easy-to-understand language and visuals as appropriate. Think about what materials will best describe the project and where those materials will be best seen (such as an in-person engagement event versus online). Informational materials can include:

- Official plans
- Maps
- Historical data/information
- Commission meetings or study sessions
- Videos/photos
- Pictograms
- Links to County websites
- Links to other websites
- Memos
- Onsite documents for viewing

Step 5: Engage the Community

By now, you should have identified stakeholders and compiled and shared information with your stakeholders. At this point you have many tools available to engage the community. To help refine your choices, start with one of the three outcomes for your engagement:

- To share information (see page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**)
- To gather information (see page 12)
- To bring people together (see page 13)

Your communications business partner can help you with tool selection and techniques as well as help you develop the appropriate materials needed during the actual engagement (if needed).

Step 6: Evaluate feedback and process

As you progress through the engagement process, you'll want to collect data that supports the project's engagement goals. To ensure a smooth process, consider:

- Assigning one staff member to be in charge of all collected data.
- Decide in advance how data will be collected—through spreadsheets, online form, survey tool, Word documents. Assign key staff as necessary.
- If you're working with multiple engagement events—or if you're performing engagement over time—you'll want to collect and sort through data throughout the process. This ensures you can see and address any emerging issues or trends.
- Think about final reporting: how will you present this data to decision makers? Will you need to include all comments in addition to aggregate reporting?

After engagement has taken place, and as you're sifting through the data, consider how the process can be refined in the future. Were the tools used effective? Did you receive a good sample size of feedback data? Are there any stakeholders you missed? How can you more effectively target audiences? Are you making the data available to the public? If so, where will you host the data and how will you communicate about it?

Methods of evaluation

- There are many ways to quantify your engagement data:
 - Website activity: hits, downloads, comments submitted
 - Social media analytics: views and engagement
 - Emails and phone calls received
 - Attendance at public hearings and meetings
 - Timeliness of informational materials on the website
 - Validity and accuracy of mailing and email lists used
 - Spreadsheets/documents/Power BI

Step 7: Follow through with stakeholders

Following-up with stakeholders is one of the most important parts of engagement. Without follow-up, stakeholders have no idea if their voices were heard or considered. Once you have selected engagement activities and feedback has been collected, you'll want to follow-up with stakeholders to let them know how you've used their input. Explain the rationale for how decisions were made. Whenever possible, link this data to any published information on the project, such as on the County website. This ensures new viewers can also see how feedback was used as part of the project. This step is consistent with Align Arapahoe metrics that track engagement opportunities.

Some projects—especially capital construction projects—may take many months or even years to complete. Work with your communications business partner to plan the appropriate follow-up as the project wraps-up or hits major milestones. Set reminders on your calendar to check-in on any outstanding communications or engagement opportunities that are part of a long-term project.

Toolbox

Techniques to share information.

Consult with your communication business partner to design an engagement strategy that utilizes these tools.

Tool	Description	Reach	Engagement opportunity
The County Line eNewsletter	Weekly online newsletter highlighting important news, events and projects throughout the County.	Electronically delivered to an average of 2,500 residents and businesses each week.	Information sharing
District-specific eCommunications	Emails sent to district specific subscribers. Used to help promote commissioner engagement events.	Ranges from 100-400 subscribers depending on District.	Information sharing Involve
Printed materials	Fact sheets, brochures, pamphlets, flyers, postcards	Usually static: shared at County locations or distributed via mail or by hand.	Information sharing
Video	Short 2-5 minute videos that can be shared via social media, website, YouTube and other sources	Depends on host: Facebook: YouTube: Website: (must be in YT)	Information sharing
Social media	Facebook Twitter NextDoor Instagram LinkedIn BlueSky Threads	Facebook Twitter NextDoor Instagram LinkedIn BlueSky Tik Tok <u>Threads</u> Note: NextDoor & Facebook can target specific neighborhoods/areas but only reaches those who have active accounts on those platforms.	Inform Consult Involve Collaborate

Website	Arapahoeco.gov	The web can be used to both alert stakeholders of an upcoming engagement opportunity as well as being a host site for project plans. Stories can be highlighted on the main page.	Inform Consult Involve Collaborate
Variable Message Boards (VMBs)	Electronic signs that can be placed on streets or thoroughfares	Contact Public Works and/or the Fairgrounds to check on availability	Inform
Internal monitors	Monitors located in building lobby locations that can feature short informational stories	Check with the business partner in your division for details	Inform
Inside Arapahoe (intranet)	County's internal communication channel for employees	Potential reach of up to 2,700 employees	Inform Engage
<u>Internal Newsletters</u>	<u>Weekly for all employees and variable for department-specific newsletters</u>	<u>Potential reach of up to 2,700 employees</u>	<u>Inform</u>
<u>Public Health Newsletter</u>	<u>Monthly online newsletter highlighting important public health news, events and projects.</u>	<u>Electronically delivered to an average of 2,800 public health regulated businesses and community partners.</u>	<u>Inform</u>
Text Messaging Service	Text messaging is increasingly favored for quick and direct communication among English-speaking residents, with 53% citing their preferred method. Similarly, 39% of Spanish-speaking residents also favor text messages.	Variable depending on cost/budget	Engage Inform Involve
Hyperlocal Engagement	Offering tailored information and conducting consultations to better engage specific communities on hyperlocal projects or to engage with hyperlocal communities.	Variable; usually smaller amounts	Inform Engage Consult Involve
AI-Driven Personalization *Not yet offered at county	Using predictive algorithms to customize engagement experiences based on user behavior and preferences, ensuring a personalized approach.	Unlimited.	Inform Engage Consult Involve

Online Engagement Tools *The County does not currently offer this service but is considering as part of the FY26 or FY 27 planning cycle.	Online engagement platforms offer governments a centralized, user-friendly way to inform and engage communities on various initiatives. These platforms support interactive and transparent communication, helping us reach broader and more diverse audiences.	Variable. These platforms need web traffic to be effective; therefore, social and earned media are important tools to build a set audience.	Inform Engage Consult Involve
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Techniques to gather information

Technique	Considerations	Benefits	Negatives
Surveys: electronic Using an online statistical survey instrument	Allows for both short and long surveys with the option of providing comment. Can also require answers (such as address or zip code) to help ensure the right people are taking the survey.	Easiest method for statistical compilation and report generation. Surveys are easy for stakeholders to take. Can be shared on multiple platforms: web, social media, etc.	System can be “gamed” by special interest groups, which can make it hard to know the quality of the data.
Web forms Simple question-answer forms through the AC website	Best used for very short surveys, 1-off questions		
Social media Facebook, Twitter, NextDoor, Instagram	While better used to share news and engagement opportunities, you can use some platforms for simple questions (Twitter) or for feedback on specific issues	Good for sharing information Good for getting specific written feedback	May not always reach intended audience. System can be “gamed” by special interest groups
Telephone Town Halls Using County’s contracted vendor for telephone or video town halls	These can be large or small events: call in (stakeholders call in) or call out for big initiatives. Contact business partner for details	Good for reaching large number of people Best suited for information that can be shared verbally, although video can be used on occasion Opportunity for simple survey question feedback	Not all stakeholders want to listen to a long call or sit through video

Comment Forms Used by several departments for ongoing evaluation of service	Slow technique, best suited for ongoing service evaluation	Lets you know how people are feeling about specific topics	People generally fill out only when they have received excellent or poor service (those in the middle tend to not fill out)
Focus groups Usually performed with a contracted consultant	Need time to alert stakeholders of focus group opportunity Recommend paying participants for their time—can get expensive	Allows you to get very detailed information from specific stakeholders	Expensive Time consuming Need consultant support
Polling Usually performed with a contracted consultant	Only certain kinds of projects are best suited for polling, such as voter considerations	Gives more statistically valid data	Expensive Time consuming Need consultant support

Techniques for bringing people together

Technique	Considerations	Benefits	Negatives
Charettes <i>Small meetings where all stakeholders in a project attempt to resolve conflicts, map solutions and generate ideas</i>	Usually need to be coordinated by an external vendor Good for design projects, such as parks and buildings or when you need to foster creative ideas	Deep dive into stakeholder ideas May generate different ideas than originally planned	Expensive Need consultant support
Community meetings/town halls <i>Variable size meetings</i>	Great for small to medium size gatherings. Need time to advertise and need space appropriate for target size	Allows stakeholders face time with decision makers and staff. Deep dive into subjects	Can sometimes suffer from “group think” Don’t always reach stakeholders in the middle (those on either end of the spectrum are more likely to attend)
Facebook Live <i>Live video link on social media platform</i>	Generally better for information sharing. Videos are archived on Facebook for future viewing	Allows for live presentations; comments and actions can be recorded as part of public comment	Not very interactive May require a staff member to monitor comments posted during broadcast
Task Force or Advisory Groups <i>Specific stakeholder groups that are pre-identified for feedback</i>	Good for gaining information from specific stakeholders on topics they are interested in or have a background in	Best suited for industry and topic-driven plans Participants gain understanding of the	Participants may not truly reflect different perspectives

		entire project, hear other perspectives and find ways to compromise	May not be willing to openly share areas of conflict Staff intensive
Tours/Field Trips	Best used when the site is specific to the feedback requested, such as a park or building	Allows for deeper elected/staff interaction with stakeholders	Logistically challenging Risk management should be consulted
Open Houses <i>Encourages people to tour at their own pace. Facility should be set up with several informational stations, each addressing a separate part of the project or issue. Staff on hand at each station to guide people through exhibits and answer questions.</i>	Someone should explain format at the entrance Have each participant fill out comment sheet to track participation Develop meeting contingency plan Encourage active participation: draw on maps or sticky notes	Fosters small group conversations in a relaxed setting Ability to share a lot of information in one organized event through different stations, covering different aspects of a project Attendees get to know employees and elected officials	Can be difficult for someone to get a perspective on the whole project (when broken up into different stations) Staff time and resource intensive. Can be difficult to document public input Attendance not likely a good representation of the entire community
Public Meetings <i>An organized large group meeting usually used to make a presentation and give the public an opportunity to ask questions and give comments at the end</i>	Make arrangements so that participants can interact in some form with staff/electeds Keep presentations concise without complicated jargon	Ability to share a lot of information in one organized event. Everyone hears the same thing at the same time	Wordy or technical presentations can be a deterrent Can escalate out of control with high emotions Often not well attended Not a productive venue for collecting community input and has limited engagement