

REBUILD BY DESIGN

Elements of Effective Engagement

Strategies for Successful Government-Community Collaboration

In November 2014, Rebuild by Design asked community leaders, design and planning experts, and government officials to discuss their experiences in creating and implementing large-scale infrastructure projects—and to highlight key strategies that can continue to make government-community collaboration effective.

This document distills their responses into specific themes and tactics. The governments of NYS, NJ, NYC, and CT can use these as they continue to develop the Rebuild by Design projects using the collaborative framework upon which the competition was based.



Challenges and Themes

Five themes emerged in the panelists' recommendations:

TIMING COLLABORATION

Panelists strongly agreed that government agencies need to invite communities to collaborate earlier in the planning process, incorporating their perspectives into a project's foundation instead of as feedback after a project's scope and emphasis has already been determined.

DEEPENING COOPERATION

Community coalitions and government-community partnerships are vital for both long-term planning and implementation. Government and community leaders must take the time to understand each other's goals and decision-making processes at the beginning of their collaborations so they can better understand and champion each other's concerns. This will lead to more comprehensive projects.

CREATING ACCESSIBLE ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The public and private sectors must address barriers that prevent meaningful participation in city processes, such as shared language, translation services, gaps in professionalized knowledge, and scheduling engagement conversations.

BUILDING CAPACITY

Community organizations are on tight budgets already assigned to other programs. Government agencies must help them find the resources they need to bring them into the planning processes and ensure meaningful engagement for new projects.

EVALUATING ENGAGEMENT

The government must gauge a project's success by the degree of collaboration that defined its process and whether its construction ultimately advances solutions to big-picture community issues such as poverty, public health, or inequality.

Case Studies

The evening was moderated by Rob Lane, Senior Fellow at the Regional Plan Association, with opening remarks by Ron Schiffman, Professor Emeritus at Pratt Institute, and Amy Chester, Managing Director at Rebuild by Design.

Speakers described their experiences in community-government collaborations, and distilled the specific elements that made the partnerships successful.



KELLIE TERRY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE POINT CDC in the neighborhood of Hunts Point in the Bronx, recounted two community initiatives. First, the South Bronx Greenway initiative, which builds off of two prior master plans to connect residential and business communities to the waterfront. Second, a revitalization and cleanup project that increased community access to the Bronx River. The Bronx River redevelopment was particularly successful despite limited resources because the community created a coalition working group that engaged Congressman José Serrano, who worked with them and became “a true champion for the Bronx River.” This partnership led to the Bronx River Alliance, a public-private partnership that employs community members to restore the river.

Both of these initiatives succeeded thanks to early collaboration between government and community organizations, which led to plans that were built from current or existing neighborhood visions for change rather than launching a new search for solutions. Replicating this requires a community that is organized, has resources, and is prepared to articulate their needs clearly to government.

JACKIE KENNEDY, STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT AND MOBILIZATION MANAGER OF THE BROWNSVILLE PARTNERSHIP, discussed the process of bringing bike lanes into Brownsville, Brooklyn. Brownsville has historically lacked investment into street safety or physical neighborhood improvements. The Brownsville Partnership made creating a bike lane network a priority and dedicated resources to hiring an organizer for the initiative. By closely collaborating with the Department of Transportation and the Brooklyn District Public Health Office, the Partnership transformed its initial vision for a single lane in the community into a 10-year bike master plan with 5.8 miles of bike lanes scheduled for Brownsville by 2015. The Department of Transportation had a consistent hand in helping plan community events and meetings, and the Brooklyn District Public Health Office discussed street safety with parents and children through their relationship with the local schools. This collaboration ensured that the community determined the bike lane locations and would support the plan’s implementation.

DREW CURTIS, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOR THE IRONBOUND COMMUNITY CORPORATION, shared the process of the Brownfield Area-wide Planning Project in Newark, NJ. Funded by the US EPA, it focused on redeveloping an industrial zone that included the former Ballantine Brewery and an inactive rail line. A local steering committee formed with diverse representation from the community to ensure that all requests related to the project could be heard and addressed throughout the process. The steering committee included residents, businesses, area nonprofits, and representatives from the City of Newark, and the State Department of Environmental Protection. The Ironbound Community Corporation worked on a series of community meetings while also focusing on day-to-day organizing in the community, creating a plan with buy-in from a broad range of stakeholders. Today, that plan is being executed and a stakeholder-supported revitalization is underway.



ADAM LUBINSKY FROM WXY presented a computer-based tool that uses simulations to help stakeholders visualize different planning scenarios. His firm used a version of it during a dispute over affordable housing in Westchester County in which **JAMES JOHNSON FROM DEBEVOISE & PLIMPTON LLP** was appointed Court Monitor. Both Johnson and Lubinsky talked about how making the data accessible and intelligible to government officials, developers, and residents helped these different stakeholder move from conflict to consensus by fostering an understanding of the trade-offs that would be involved in pursuing different visions of development. Applying this approach earlier in the process would further advance collaboration.

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Tactics and Approaches

The case studies revealed specific lessons that connected to the larger themes during the program. The following are specific tactics that government offices and community organizations can use in the Rebuild by Design projects or other collaborations.

TIMING COLLABORATION

- Governments need to be more transparent from the early stages of planning, bringing residents and community leaders to the table when decisions are still being formed.
- Testing small forms of large proposals with community stakeholders before unveiling plans or implementation strategies will shape projects around collective priorities, strengthening the final design solutions and community buy-in.
- Broadly framing the concerns that relate to a project at an early stage of development brings disparate interest groups together to guide the process.

DEEPENING COOPERATION

- Government must let residents speak for themselves, and heed their concerns.
- Government must base its development strategies and implementation plans upon the community's ongoing work, rather than "starting from scratch" to define problems or design solutions.
- Government can conduct outreach through existing community-based organizations and help create local steering committees to incorporate diverse interests.

CREATING ACCESSIBLE ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Holding meetings in neighborhood establishments and hosting less-conventional activities such as community bike rides, volunteer projects, and celebrations can bring more people into the planning process.

- Government agencies and community groups should work with civic organizations and use planning tools that expand opportunities for non-professionals to participate in planning.
- Government needs to more clearly convey the social impacts and financial viabilities that underpin different planning scenarios. Good data dispels incorrect assumptions about the costs or effects of proposed changes, and empowers stakeholders to visualize the trade-offs involved in different planning scenarios.
- Planning tools can facilitate good engagement, but cannot take the place of advocacy: both the public and community sectors need to directly engage residents about the projects using appropriate



mediums, language, and locations.

BUILDING CAPACITY

- Communities themselves must be organized, have resources, be prepared, and be proactive in articulating their needs to government.
- Community organizations that can dedicate staff time to projects will help their communities organize more consistently.
- Government can rely more on community organizations' ongoing relationships with residents, and aim to ensure that they have the resources they need to participate.
- Community organizations can combine campaigns around projects with other outreach or integrate their efforts with those of other community groups.

EVALUATING ENGAGEMENT

- In the words of one panelist, "success is the sustainability and resiliency of neighborhoods so they can see [and participate in] the processes that are impacting their lives."
- Surveys, especially those which employed community members, help organizations establish qualitative and quantitative feedback about engagement.
- Communities judge government's success in part by how flexibly and inclusively it provided multiple points of engagement for stakeholders.

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