

# Adapting Engagement

/ Elicia Elliott RPP, MCIP and Niccolai Wang

In March 2020, planners and the public we serve experienced a significant shift after governments declared states of emergency due to COVID-19. Large gatherings were prohibited, social distancing orders were put in place, and working from home was strongly encouraged or made mandatory. Overnight, the way we collaborate, gather, and engage changed.

Despite this sudden and drastic shift, many projects marched on. And in this

strange time, we reflected on the grounding truth that the foundations of good engagement haven't changed; we still practice knowing that public policy and infrastructure projects are most valuable and effective when created collaboratively.

The authors of this article work in communities which range from rural to regional in West Virginia, Washington State, and California to urban projects in Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, and New York. Our

projects typically see us engaging folks at the Inform, Consult, and Involve end of the public participation spectrum, as defined by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) – see figure 1. This article focuses on what we have learned during this pandemic.

Before this pandemic, our team was already leveraging technology to undertake engagement: online surveys; accessibility tools such as screen reader compatibility for



visually impaired people; and video calls. We tailor each project, using customized apps and digital delivery including enhanced visualizations and models, as well as proven ways of working from the tech sector, such as fast-paced, intense, and iterative work-review-work periods called sprints. This pandemic has enabled us to dig deeper into our digital toolbox and build new tools. It has also helped sharpen our core engagement skills overall.

A few of the key opportunities and challenges we have encountered in this unique time:

### Engagement opportunities during a pandemic

- folks are home to receive direct mail and newspapers
- some stakeholders have more time and/or capacity for project engagement
- reallocating engagement spending away from large, in-person gatherings like open houses can mean more resources are available for innovative, creative approaches

### Engagement challenges during a pandemic

- doing more with less: reductions in staff, budgets, and overall resources can make project delivery a challenge
- shifting client or government priorities may mean engagement stops or stalls mid-way through a project, losing valuable momentum
- content development, approvals, and launches can take longer
- independent experts and service providers such as translators or accessibility consultants may have reduced or no capacity, meaning creating inclusive engagement material may be challenging
- some stakeholders are overwhelmed with screen time, making online engagement challenging, or have reduced/no capacity for engagement
- even in video calls, it can be difficult to read stakeholders' tone, body lan-

guage, and social cues, meaning that communication can be misinterpreted

- Engaging hard-to-reach folks may be even more difficult as they may not have access to technology. In-person outreach may be limited due to social distancing requirements.

### Informing

#### Digital Tools

- project websites
- social media posts
- email databases
- radio & TV ads
- webinars
- recorded presentations

#### Analog Tools

- print materials, available at pick up/drop off boxes outside community hubs such as transit stations, grocery stores
- static advertising; billboards, newspapers, road signs
- direct mail
- project phone number with recorded information

While some stakeholders' capacity to intake information has been limited through this pandemic, other stakeholders are paying even closer attention to available information. It has become even more important to ensure key messages, timelines, and up-to-date information are available. We have been able to address this by enhancing the quality (and in some cases, the quantity) of engagement information during this time.

When communicating through technology, given the absence of face-to-face opportunities, we avoid using jargon, do not overload on acronyms, focus in on critical details, and provide access to background information for those seeking extra detail.

### Consulting & Involving:

#### Digital Tools

- project website with live chat
- social media sessions (Facebook, Instagram) such as "Ask me Anything"

- webinars with Q & A session and/or breakout groups
- online surveys with report-back via newsletter/survey summary

#### Analog Tools

- print version of project websites and/or materials, available at pick up/drop off box outside community hubs such as transit stations, grocery stores
- direct mail, paid postage surveys
- staffed, interactive project phone number
- phone surveys
- socially-distanced in-person gatherings adherent to government guidelines

Undertaking Consulting and Involving during this pandemic has been even more challenging than before, partially because everything seems to take longer in the age of COVID, and partially because iterative engagement can be difficult to achieve when stakeholders' attention spans and capacity may be reduced.

Additionally, it can be challenging to undertake meaningful Consulting and Involving when the process is nonlinear, interrupted or delayed. Paramount to removing barriers in Consult and Involve stages is providing information early and often throughout the process. In the case of this pandemic, we have found folks needed more time than usual to review materials in advance. We also budgeted more resources for dress rehearsals of virtual engagement sessions to enhance our preparedness.

As restrictions ease, it may become possible to convene in-person. For these gatherings, consider:

- using a larger venue to accommodate social distancing
- using a venue where it is possible to provide the same engagement opportunities in separate/ adjacent spaces
- budgeting for the provision of appropriate personal protective equipment and hand-washing materials for staff and attendees
- using a greeter to monitor the number of attendees inside the venue and take contact info for COVID tracing, if necessary

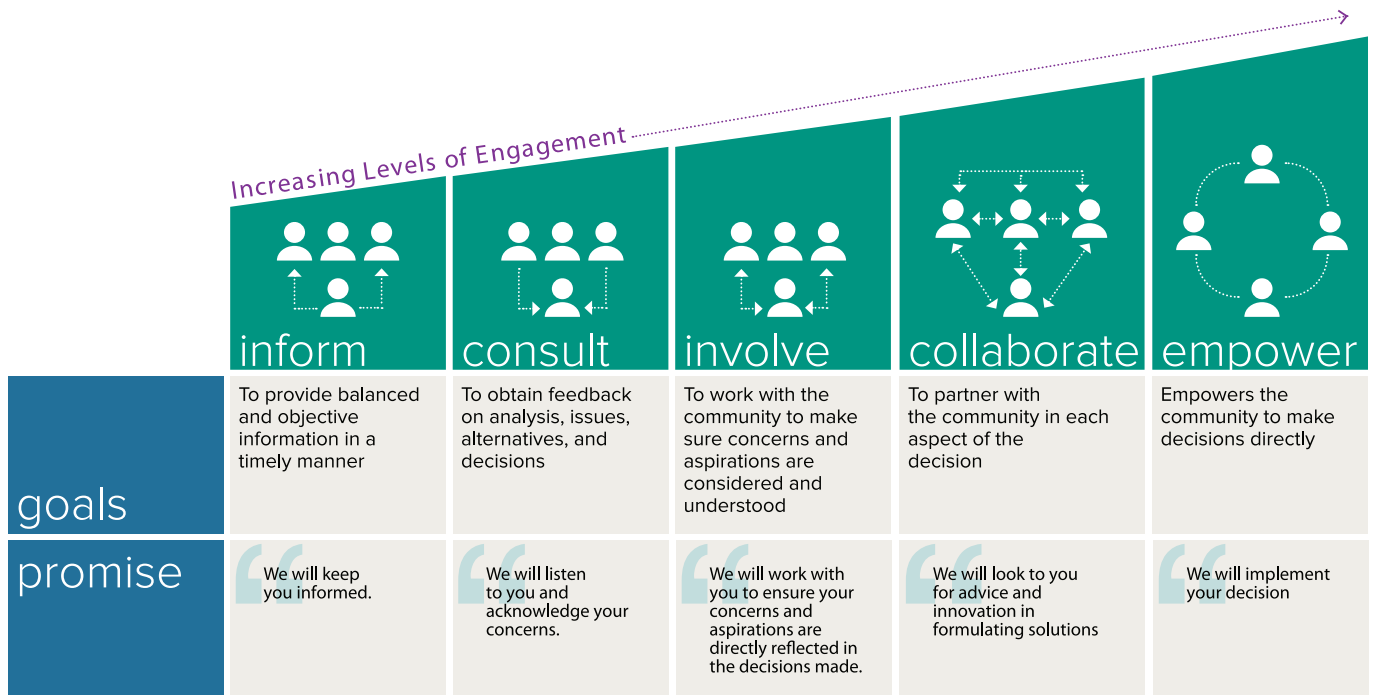


Figure 1: IAP2's Levels of Engagement

- setting up an overflow protocol to help manage expectations and respect people’s willingness to be involved. This could include handing out printed materials, doing a live broadcast outside the venue, or accommodating registered attendees first and queuing walk-in attendees.

### Collaborating & Empowering during a pandemic

As per IAP2’s spectrum of engagement, through Inform, Consult and Involve, we work with the public to understand their needs and concerns and use feedback to inform decision-making. Collaborating and Empowering involves or empowers stakeholders to make decisions directly rather than only influencing decision-making. This level of engagement benefits from iterative, face-to-face collaboration over a period of time, which requires due care in convening, resourcing, and

facilitating engagement processes. Given current circumstances, waiting to undertake this level of engagement may be prudent.

No matter which engagement methods are chosen, one of the foundational pieces of doing this work is reflected in an IAP2 Promise to the Public: *that public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.* We can go further by co-creating engagement processes that are universally inclusive, thoughtful and responsive to current realities – even as those realities evolve.

We encourage planners to keep in mind that the use of new engagement tools, methods, and processes may limit some people’s participation and the type or amount of feedback they provide. As we adapt to a new normal and navigate the uncertainty of the future, we can do well to remember that planners and the public are learning together. ■

The authors would like to express our gratitude to fellow planners for a continued commitment to serving the public through our work, and to the public for being resilient and engaged during this uncertain time.

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