

Community Engagement Planning Processes

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School Districts across the country have to make decisions about how to maintain, improve and repair their facilities. As stewards of the community's resources, they work to make decisions that create the most value for the school district. Oftentimes the strongest decisions are unclear; frequently the district may have to obtain public support to provide the funding needed to implement a plan.

In the past, it was not uncommon for school districts to develop a solution, tell the community what it was, and move ahead, without any real input from citizens. But citizens have become much more resistant to this "top-down" planning approach. If school districts are to obtain "public permission" school stakeholders need to be involved.

What is an engagement process?

An engagement planning process is simply a process where decision making is extended beyond the board of education and administration; it asks community members to "put their board member hat on" and take ownership for the development of the solution. The goal of the process is the development of a "Master Plan" which outlines the steps that the school district should take over the next several years to arrive at an optimal educational facility configuration.

What happens in an engagement process?

In their simplest forms, all planning processes answer three simple questions:

Where are we now?

Where do we want to be?

How do we get there?

Community participants in an engagement process should ideally participate in answering these questions, through their own work, during a series of public meetings, leading to a recommended Master Plan for the board of education's consideration.

What is a Master Plan?

A master plan is a "road map" for future facilities decision making, and does several things. First, it identifies the future vision for educational facilities configuration (How many facilities do we want? What are the desired grade configurations? How should they be located within the community? How well do our current facilities fit this vision? What are the facilities configurations that will create the greatest benefit at the lowest cost to the school district, etc.)

Next, the master plan answers the question: How do we make this happen given our current facilities? Typically, master plans are constructed in phases over time as opposed to being constructed all at once. The plan is typically broken into phases (some people say "chunks") to align with the school district's financial capabilities (it's not unusual for a master plan to require 10 – 20 years + to complete). The final plan identifies each phase, what work will be completed, the costs for the work, and the schedule for completing all phases.

One of the main goals for developing a master plan is to identify the work of the first phase, allowing the school district to proceed, comfortable in the knowledge that they are making good decisions. Only

through the development of a plan can board of education members be confident that every dollar spent is a dollar well spent: they know that it's moving the school district closer to an optimal educational facilities configuration.

How is the community involved?

While there are multiple ways citizens can participate and contribute, this engagement process is built around two primary methods: First, citizens are invited to attend each of the Community Engagement Sessions. The sessions are located in 3 different communities to maximize attendance. *It's important to note that each meeting builds on the other, so attendance at all three is highly encouraged!*

Second, a group of citizens' who currently work with the school district on advisory committees have been combined to create a Citizen's Leadership Committee. This group is working with the school planning facilitators to create and approve the content that is presented at each of the Community Engagement sessions, and to assist in the interpretation of the community feedback. Ultimately, this group is charged with the responsibility to take the feedback obtained through Community engagement meetings, and develop a recommended Master Plan for Board of Education consideration.

What happens at community meetings?

Citizens learn about the issues that the school district must address regarding their educational facilities, and are asked how they would respond if it were their decision to make. The ideas proposed by citizens are then developed by school facility planners, and compared using a cost benefit analysis. Results are then presented back to community members at subsequent meetings, providing participant with detailed information needed to inform their recommendations (things like life cycle costs, construction costs, operation and maintenance costs, and functional suitability evaluations).

Subsequent community meetings follow a similar format to narrow the options, eventually identifying a preferred scenario, its cost, and proposed phasing. After completing this work, the Citizen's Leadership Committee presents its recommendation to the board of education for their consideration. The board of education is ultimately responsible to making the final decision of adopting the master plan, or asking for revisions.

What is the schedule of events of this planning process?

The attached schedule shows the activities planned and the schedule of the work to be performed.