

September 3, 2024

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

TO: Mayor and Members of Council

FROM: Sheryl M.M. Long, City Manager 

SUBJECT: Project Engage – The City Manager’s Community Engagement Plan and Policy

I am pleased to share with you the final City of Cincinnati Community Engagement Plan and Policy, as prepared on my behalf by the staff of the Department of City Planning and Engagement.

BACKGROUND

On September 1, 2021, City Council approved Ordinance 0358-2021 requesting the City Manager, with input and participation from the public, community councils, community groups, and City partners, develop an additional community engagement plan. The Ordinance was formed to improve and increase City-led community engagement according to the policy goals outlined: 1) providing efficient and effective services, 2) increasing transparency and effectiveness, 3) acknowledging that those affected by local government decisions should have the opportunity to participate in an engagement process, 4) allowing for greater transparency and citizen participation, 5) adhering to the previously established community engagement policy, and 6) presenting an additional community engagement plan. The Ordinance requested that the City Manager convene an initial public engagement session no later than 60 days after the effective date of the ordinance.

CREATION OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAN AND POLICY

Community Conversations

The City Manager asked the Department of City Planning and Engagement to facilitate the initial community engagement sessions to collect public input and prepare a report of the findings. In October 2021, the Department sent out a survey and held three Citywide input meetings. Staff launched the Community Conversations project on the City website including meeting dates, a link to the survey, and other feedback opportunities. Members of the public were invited to all public input meetings.

The Community Conversations were held in November 2021 at Bond Hill Recreation Center, Westwood Town Hall, and virtually via Zoom. All meetings were held in the evening. The meetings were focused on collecting information about ideal community engagement practices based on five question prompts. Staff led the participants in small group discussion. Additionally, a community engagement survey was conducted on SurveyMonkey and was open to the public from October 15, 2021 to December 1, 2021, to collect feedback about current City communication and engagement tools.

The participants of the survey and meetings represented a variety of stakeholders and constituent groups. Survey respondents represented thirty-three (33) City neighborhoods. One hundred and fifty-nine (159) survey responses were submitted. Twenty-three (23) participants attended the meeting in Bond Hill. Twenty-one (21) participants attended the meeting in Westwood. Forty-one (41) participants attended the virtual meeting. A total of eight-five (85) individuals participated in the meetings. The report and a

description of the full process are available on the Department of City Planning and Engagement website here: www.cincinnati-oh.gov/community-conversations The Department of City Planning and Engagement also provided a presentation on the findings of the Community Conversations at the 2022 Neighborhood Summit and at a meeting of the Healthy Neighborhoods Committee on June 1, 2022.

Bloomberg Innovation Training

In the Fall of 2021, the City applied for and received a grant to participate in the Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation's year-long community engagement research project. As a part of the Bloomberg process, 12 City staff members, including the City Manager and Mayor, participated in workshops to identify and address problems with community engagement.

The Bloomberg process highlighted a crucial issue: traditionally, the City relied on expediency and existing power structures, which left many residents feeling unheard. This led to apathy and distrust. To address this challenge, the City established a new set of objectives:

- Create a city-wide community engagement framework
- Increase opportunities for residents to interact with City staff
- Develop a civic education manual for residents
- Promote diversity and representation within city operations

Development of City's Communications and Engagement Action Team

To ensure the success of the future Community Engagement Plan and Policy, it was important to also expand the capacity of the City's Community Engagement and Communications staff. In 2022, the City Manager's Office re-established the Office of Communications and throughout the year hired three staff members, including a Director of Communications. In the FY2023 City of Cincinnati Budget, two Community Engagement Specialist positions were allocated to the Department of City Planning and Engagement to develop and implement the Community Engagement Policy. Those positions were filled in January and August of 2023.

Following the work of the Bloomberg project, the internal Strategic Initiative Execution Tool (SIET) Communications and Engagement Action Team was formed in Spring 2023 to include a staff-level representative from nearly all City departments with the goal of guiding development of the Community Engagement Policy and Resource Guide and securing support from City Staff.

Engagement with City Staff

To create a long-term and sustainable culture of engagement, it was critical to also engage City employees in the development of the draft Community Engagement Plan and Policy. In the summer of 2022, the Department of City Planning and Engagement conducted outreach with each department Director to seek input about how each department currently engages the community and identify potential areas of improvement. In Spring 2023, a survey about community engagement was sent to all City employees. Over 700 employees responded to the survey. The result of engagement at both leadership and all-staff levels was a resounding agreement that community engagement is important but that there is a need for more training, support, and resources to ensure success.

The First and Second Drafts of the Plan and Policy

Attachment A of Ordinance 0358-2021 was used as an initial guide for the Plan and Policy, but the draft evolved to include the input from the in-person and virtual Community Conversations held in November 2021, the one-on-one interviews with department Directors in 2022, and the Employee Survey in 2023.

The Communications and Engagement SIET Working Group played a significant role in completing the drafts. The overall work was led by the Department of City Planning and Engagement's two Community Engagement Specialists with great assistance from the Office of Communications.

Engagement on the First Draft Plan and Policy

The First Draft of the plan and policy was released on October 23, 2023. The Department of City Planning and Engagement offered numerous opportunities for all members of the Cincinnati community to provide input on the Draft Community Engagement Policy:

- The First Draft Plan and Policy was available on the City's website at: <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/engage/>
- Several in-person meetings held in the Fall of 2023 allowed community members to give direct input on the policy and participate in an exercise to assist in development of the definitions. Meetings were held in the evenings at Pleasant Ridge Recreation Center, Hirsch Recreation Center in Avondale, and McKie Recreation Center in Northside.
- The Communications and Engagement SIET Team held two pop-up events at Cream and Sugar Coffee House and the Downtown Public Library to gather additional insight on the draft.
- For those unable to attend an in-person meeting, an online feedback survey was available on the City's website through October.

Fifty-two (52) individuals participated in the meetings. Thirteen (13) participants attended the meeting in Pleasant Ridge; nineteen (19) participants attended the meeting in Avondale; and twenty (20) participants attended the meeting in Northside. Survey respondents represented seventeen (17) City neighborhoods. Forty-three (43) survey responses were submitted.

Engagement on the Second Draft Plan and Policy

After reviewing the results and making updates based on the first round of engagement, the Department of City Planning and Engagement offered an opportunity for the public to comment on the second draft, ensuring community members who participated in prior engagements and provided comment on the first draft had an opportunity to see how their input shaped the second draft. The Second Draft of the plan and policy was released on May 1, 2024, and was available on the City's website from May 1 to June 15, 2024. The online feedback survey featured a side-by-side comparison of the first and second drafts along with an opportunity to provide digital comment. Physical copies of the draft policy and feedback form were also available at all Cincinnati Recreation Commission (CRC) Recreation Centers and the Downtown Public Library. Twenty-seven (27) comments on the second draft were submitted, and most were complimentary of the updated work.

The Plan and Policy was finalized based on the comments received on the first and second drafts.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RESOURCE GUIDE

In addition to the attached Plan and Policy, a Resource Guide has been developed for City Staff. The Resource Guide provides direction, support, ideas, and templates on engagement expectations according to the Plan and Policy. The Resource Guide is available on the City's website at <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/engage/>. Because it is primarily web-based, it is expected to be a living document that will be updated continually to reflect successful examples of community engagement in real time. To accommodate those who prefer a hard-copy Resource Guide, a PDF copy will also be made available and updated once each year.

STAFF TRAINING

All City staff will be required to participate in a comprehensive training program developed between the Department of City Planning and Engagement and the Department of Human Resources. The outline of the full training program will be developed by the end of 2024. Staff will begin the first training module in Fall 2024 with the goal of having 10% of City staff complete the first module by June 30, 2025.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TRACKING

The Department of City Planning and Engagement along with the Office of Performance and Data Analytics has developed a method of tracking community engagement activities and setting measurements for success. The expectation and process for tracking community engagement activities will be incorporated into the first module of the City staff training. The tracking and measurement of the Plan and Policy will direct any future updates to both the Plan and Policy and the Resource Guide.

NEXT STEPS

The Final Plan and Policy went into effect for all City departments on September 1, 2024. Notably, many departments that have participated in the Communications and Engagement SIET Working Group have already begun to implement this policy informally.

There are no additional financial resources proposed for implementation at this time, but any future resources required will be requested beginning during the regular budget cycle.

The objective of this process has been to develop a Community Engagement Plan and Policy that not only meets the policy goals outlined in Ordinance 0358-2021, but is a national model for engagement. I am proud to share this commitment to excellence in community engagement with you and ask for your support and assistance in implementation.

Attachment - Community Engagement Policy

cc: William "Billy" Weber, Assistant City Manager
Katherine Keough-Jurs, FAICP, Director, Department of City Planning and Engagement