

Emerging Trends: Equity in Engagement

At The City of Calgary, decisions are made daily related to programs, services, and investments that serve more than a million Calgarians. The City recognizes that these decisions are improved by engaging those who may be interested in or affected by those decisions. How we engage Calgarians has evolved over time to better meet the needs of those we serve. Three emergent trends that have informed our current engagement processes include:

- Strengthening inclusion and belonging
- Meeting Calgarians where they are
- Following process, respecting people

Strengthening Inclusion and Belonging

The City is committed to continuously monitoring and improving approaches to inclusive engagement to ensure that the voices and values of all Calgarians can be heard and understood. In the past, many engagement campaigns relied on broad communication and the hope and expectation that Calgarians would come to us to provide relevant input. We have realized in recent years that this approach can reinforce exclusion, as it does not explicitly seek out and make room for voices missing from the conversation.

This shift in approach is centered on the understanding that missing voices matter and are an important part of thorough engagement and decision making. In making this shift, we also recognize that there is work to be done through every engagement program to build or rebuild trust between equity-deserving groups and The City. This comes not only from how we engage those groups, but also from how we consider that input and implement feedback through project design and decision making. Transparency of process and demonstrating how we honor and incorporate feedback are key to developing trust and lasting relationships.

Implementing this shift is about more than removing barriers; it requires a commitment to flexible and adaptive engagement programs. Greater research is required at the onset of projects to identify equity-deserving communities for engagement, or the organizations and community leaders to assist this process. Once these equity-deserving groups are identified, engagement approaches and tactics are built collaboratively with representatives to ensure barriers to participation are addressed. In addition, active outreach and recruitment is typically required for engagement, as opposed to traditional and passive methods. Examples of specific accommodations include but are not limited to translation and interpretation, use of community brokers and partner networks, childcare at engagement sessions, and adaptive technologies such as screen readers or audible signage.

Meeting Calgarians Where They Are

The City understands that different individuals need to engage in different ways. We select engagement tactics that are responsive to community and individual needs, and seek to make engagement accessible to those who are interested in and affected by the projects The City undertakes.

This includes a blended approach of online and in-person activities, leveraging the unique benefits of each method. While the shift to primarily online engagement was a necessity during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tools and techniques developed during that period have continued to provide benefit to Calgarians, even after restrictions around public gatherings were lifted. Many

Calgarians have told us that online meetings and events make it easier for them to participate, as they do not need to worry about issues such as driving to venues or coordinating childcare.

Conversely, there are Calgarians who favor in person meetings, based on personal preference or specific needs. Because of this, we evaluate the need for blended in-person and online approaches to engagement on every project and ensure that in-person activities are accessible and welcoming to those who need them. This includes hosting community pop-up engagement, attending neighbourhood and cultural activities and events, offering childcare and refreshments, and ensuring we select accessible and appropriate venues for in-person activities.

Follow Process, Respect People

We understand that engagement on City projects can be an emotional experience. City decision-making can intersect many aspects of Calgarians' lives, from how they get around, to the services they receive, to the way they make a living, or the way their communities grow and redevelop. While these changes are exciting for some, they can create feelings of uncertainty and fear for others. In addition, engaging on City projects can stir memories of past experiences with The City, and the good, bad, and strong emotions tied to those experiences.

When developing engagement programs, we work with project teams to create appropriate and productive ways of dealing with emotion and outrage, both in terms of engagement design and training for City staff. We seek to understand hot button issues for communities and individuals, related to both the project and other City initiatives, and ensure that project teams are prepared with appropriate questions and messaging to have productive and respectful conversations. This includes honoring the emotions of participants, while creating boundaries to ensure the physical and emotional safety of City staff. The City offers advanced emotion and outrage training to facilitate these difficult conversations.

Choosing appropriate tools and techniques can give people space to be heard. When planning our engagement sessions, we are intentional about creating space for emotional participants, and contingencies for Calgarians who have strong feelings or are angry about City work outside the scope of a project. For small groups and workshops, we look at who will be attending, and decide how to best structure discussion groups to ensure everyone can hear a diversity of opinions, without being overtaken by the loudest voices in the room. Our most experienced facilitators and project team members are paired with the most emotional participants to unpack their feelings and get to the heart of their concerns. Similarly, in large events such as an open house, we have places where people can go to talk about heated issues so that we can honor their emotions, while also maintaining a safe environment for other participants.

We recognize that Calgarians often see The City as one organization, not a collection of individual business units serving different functions, and because of this, we make best efforts to pass along out-of-scope comments and concerns to the appropriate colleague or team. This includes sharing concerns with operational teams, project teams, and working with councillors and their staff to highlight areas of community concern. Where possible, we make best efforts to connect Calgarians directly with a colleague to build a trusting and productive relationship, and to close the loop on citizen concerns.