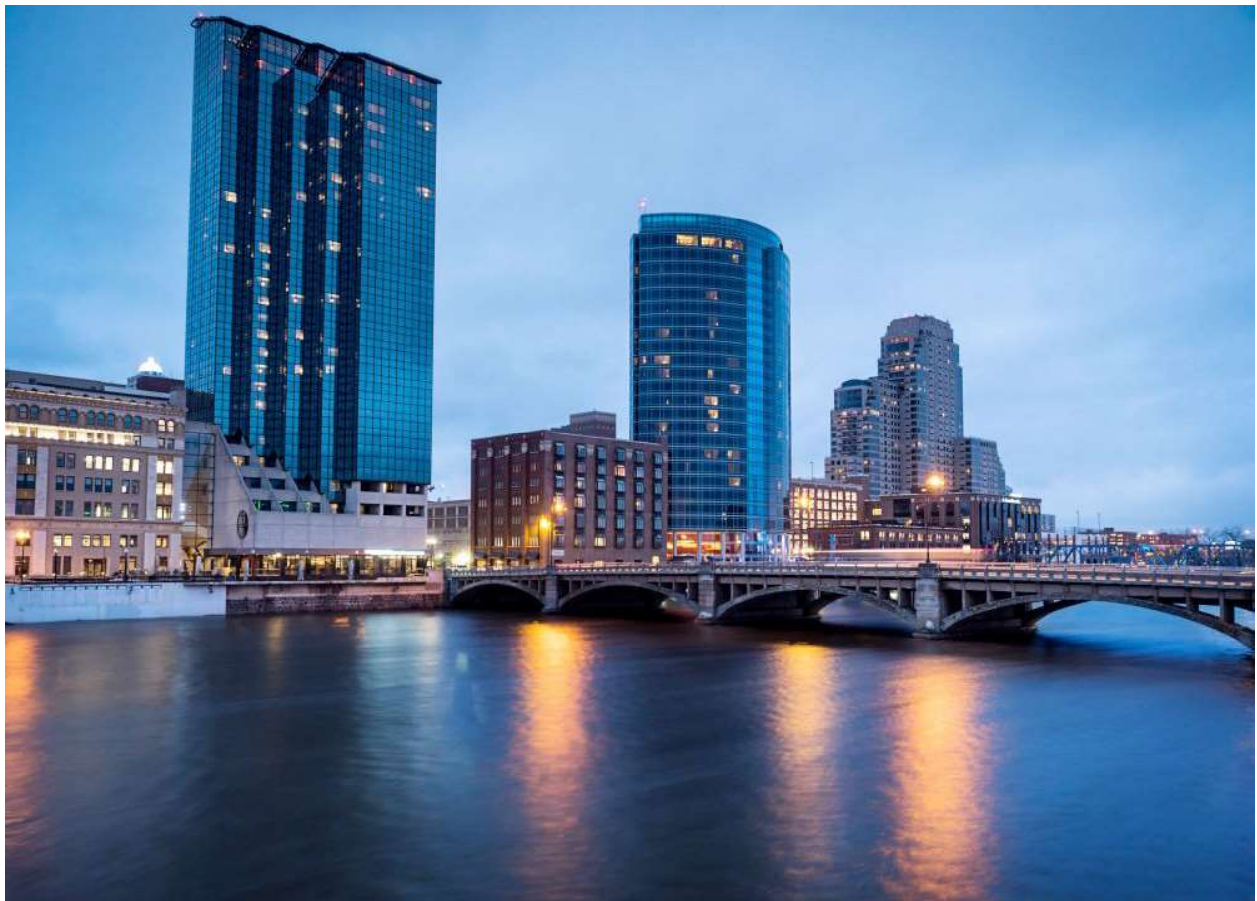


Prepared by Sergio Cira Reyes
For Public Agency

River for All

Framework for Equitable Engagement



Process Narrative

As part of their preparation for the project, the Community Catalysts Team followed a journey of self reflection and exploration, development of relationships as collaborators, understanding of the project, and an in depth analysis of equity and inclusion in the context of the river restoration's impact on the immediate neighborhoods and broader community. This was all before the engagement process started.

In order to fully appreciate the historical context rich with sensitive cultural elements and complex power dynamics tied to the land where the River Restoration Project is proposed, guests from the Native American community and long time residents with deep roots to the surrounding neighborhoods were invited as guests. These conversations were formative to the perspective and approach taken by the Community Catalysts in the engagement work.

Public Agency facilitated the process using the Human Centered Design Method. The intent was to develop a plan for a river activation that would both capture important information about how people desire to use the river-adjacent spaces in the future, and help spark the imagination of Grand Rapids residents of what new communal spaces along the river might look like and function. Initially our goal was to accomplish this through multiple in person interviews and engagement events with a broad range of community members. Unfortunately Covid-19 presented serious barriers and the approach was revised.

Empathy Interviews

Two rounds of interviews were conducted by the Catalyst team for a total of 30 interviews with community members from different walks of life. The first round was to surface stories, dreams, and pain points with the existing river frontage, connections to water, nature, place and community. This initial round of interviews had to be conducted via Zoom to comply with state guidelines. The second round of interviews were conducted in person at the riverside. This enabled the Catalysts to engage participants in conversations about the senses. Being physically present allowed for sensory exercises and visualization of what could be, how they felt and experienced the river in its current state and to also think about the experience and needs of family and friends.

Synthesis

The overall purpose of the interviews with community members was to understand them as individuals, as a member of their respective communities, and to understand their needs. This was key to the process in that it gave the Catalysts hundreds of data points, demographic information, background, lived experience, current use of the river if any, and other needs which would need to be met if they were to come to the river once the restoration is complete.

Once all interviews were completed, each Catalyst invited one of their interviewees to join the Catalyst team in an ideation session. This was a collaborative session in which the Catalysts surfaced insights from their interviewees and together focused on "how might we create experiences in and around the Grand River which would meet the needs of as many populations so that they would come to the river." Many ideas surfaced including activation, transportation, practical use, and other ways to meet the needs which trended from the interviews. These were

synthesized and grouped according to feasibility, desirability and practicality. Out of these 10 themes emerged and are included in the main report.

Key Engagement Insights

Equity and Inclusivity

The Community Catalysts who agreed to collaborate on this project are all deeply connected to community through their personal and professional work. Not surprisingly, one of the first topics of discussion was to understand how equity and inclusion would inform the project. Therefore, the following definitions were reached and a commitment to infuse the work with these two values was clearly stated.

Equity describes a metric that can be used to quantify how well systems, policies, and outcomes are performing at providing individuals and groups with the resources, power, influence, opportunity that they need to thrive proportionate to their need.

Inclusivity is a metric or a policy which seeks to make or do something collaboratively with everyone at the table who needs to be present. It is a proactive approach which prioritizes access, which builds on relationships and trust but which also describes how something feels to someone looking from the outside in.

- Hugo Claudin's raising of homeless population, When the river is open,
- Vanessa Cervantes perspective on how it needs to be family friendly
- Isabel Lopez makes the point about people's need for public space for personal and professional use
- Keyuana Rosemond makes the point about access through the lens of race
- Elaine Lewis talks about safety from a different perspective

Levels of Engagement

With equity and inclusion in mind, we set out to identify what type of engagement this process would involve. Some immediate questions which emerged were:

- Is this feedback from community going to be used?
- How much of it?
- How will residents know?
- What if residents change their mind?

The [International Association of Public Participation](#) (IAP2) has developed the widely used "Spectrum of Public Participation." It is imperative that any entity or system actively seeking to understand its constituents also set out a clear strategy based on whether they want to inform, consult, involve, collaborate, or empower. Often the type, intent or aspirations do not fit the level at which they actually set out to engage with community.

The IAP2, offers these five levels of engagement with a goal and a promise at each level. They are as follows:

Inform

Public participation goal: To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.

Promise to the public: We will keep you informed.

Consult

Public participation goal: To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

Promise to the public: We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.

Involve

Public participation goal: To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

Promise to the public: We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

Collaborate

Public participation goal: To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

Promise to the public: We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.

Empower

Public participation goal: To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

Promise to the public: We will implement what you decide.

It is important to note that not all engagements with community require the same approach, rather a project of this magnitude should involve the public at all levels. Ultimately, managing expectations in a transparent way so that residents understand exactly how their feedback will be used is key to developing trust and transparency with the public. Both the public and all strategic partners & stakeholders should know exactly what type of engagement they are participating in. When analyzed through an equity lens serious consideration must be given to the option of a pragmatic approach as to the levels of engagement for the various phases of the project. One level of engagement can be used for stakeholders, another for strategic partners and yet a different level for subgroups within community.

Trust Community Wisdom

There is no one better position to give insight into how well a system, process or product works than the extreme users, or those who use it the most. Through this process we learned that we might have overlooked some important demographics such as the homeless. They spend a significant amount of time by the river especially during the warm months of the year. This project does not benefit from their lived experience. We recommend a follow up engagement centering their experience.

Engagement Framework Elements

Much insight has been gathered through the design process, the sharing of collective experience of the Catalysts, and the empathy interviews from community voices. The following is a framework to inform future engagement efforts along the various stages of the River Restoration Project, whether it is the Downtown Development Authority, a consortium of stakeholders, or another managing entity once the project has been completed.

Disparities by race in Grand Rapids have been well documented in works like that of Todd E. Robinson's *A City Within a City*, and more recently Forbes ranking of Grand Rapids as the second worst place for African Americans to prosper. A project of this magnitude has the potential to exacerbate these disparities but it also has the potential to move our economy in a new direction. This is why leading with equity in all engagement efforts is first on the list.

Lead with Equity

When we talk about equity we refer to meeting the needs of community by resourcing and giving weight to their voice in a way which is proportionate to their need and not an equal share.

- Prioritize voices according to power. Equal is not equitable; Historically influential sectors and perspectives with disproportionate representation will continue to emerge to the forefront. Set measures which include the representation of marginalized voices in the planning, design, execution, and management of the completed project.
- Center the most vulnerable, (the homeless, economically disadvantaged, people with other abilities)

Transparency and Accountability

- Understand, acknowledge, honor historical context tied to peoples and place
- Focus on measurable Outcomes rather than intentions
- Acknowledge power dynamics and actively work to address them
- Be transparent with priorities and budgets
- Create Checks and Balances for systems, economic drivers, politics, to exist in a symbiotic relationship which does not sacrifice community voice
- Manage expectations with clear communication for each constituency every step of the way
- Provide information for residents to participate in a meaningful way
- Create a feedback loop to keep community informed of how their feedback is informing the process

Collaborative & Shared Leadership

- Coalition building should precede design. Meaningful participation from stakeholders in multiple sectors who can offer valuable input and from residents will require the bridging of the historic engagement gap that exists between large scale development projects and community. Adequate efforts must be made to build coalition prior to planning and design of the project.
- Level the playing field to create conditions for power neutral communication. Empower all participants to provide feedback with the same confidence, same enthusiasm, same

freedom, same state of mind. Provide all the tools and resources for informed decisions to be made.

- Engaging for collaboration with the goal of creating community buy-in.

Ongoing & Sustainable

- Engagement must be ongoing throughout every step of the process. There must be a focus on relationship building for equitable outcomes to be maximized. Working with local institutions trusted by community is a vital part of a sustainable relationship. This includes:
 - Community Stakeholders from diverse fields and serving representative sectors with an emphasis on those serving marginalized communities
 - Community Consultants or residents who are compensated for their time
- Much like the design process, a relationship built on trust and mutual understanding will require multiple engagement points which are ongoing and iterative. One initial and sole engagement is not enough, it must be followed up with maintained periodic engagements.

Inclusive

- Engage with people from all walks of life
 - This approach places equal value on the experience of people from multiple communities such as race, gender orientation, class, ability, age, country of origin, language and lifestyles.

Resourced

- Recognize that the engagement process should be designed with the understanding that it is a time intensive process and that appropriate resources will have to be allocated. It is a value in practice.
- Adequate budget, proportionate to the scale and duration of this permanent practice, is not the only consideration in terms of resources. Internal capacity in terms of staff to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders and the general public should also be built.

End-user Centric & Accessible

- An engagement strategy must be designed specifically and intentionally for all communities with messaging centered on their values and culturally competent
- The implications are that the team designing the strategy must be culturally competent, ideally internal as to maintain capacity and facilitate the building of meaningful relations with community
- Engagement tools should be accessible with a variety of mediums including visual aids and accessible language, while avoiding field specific jargon
- Intentional steps to design with all possible end users rather than perpetuating a river experience centered around the limited sectors of community who currently frequent and use the river

- In order to reach a broad spectrum of end users, multiple methods of engagement should be utilized. This can include one on one interviews, online surveys, focus groups, multiple locations, and community meetings happening at trusted sites or where people already congregate
- Not all conversations about the River Restoration Project need to happen at the Grand River. Community should be met where they are, where they feel comfortable

Eliminate Barriers & Provide Incentives

- There should be a focus on eliminating barriers such as transportation, child care, and intimidating settings. Going to places where targeted demographics already congregate and in a language they speak. Relying on an interpreter with little background knowledge on the subject matter is not recommended.
- Provide incentives, such as gift cards, whenever possible to avoid extracting knowledge from **community consultants** without compensation.

Additional Considerations

The IAP2 also collaborated with the National Coalition for Dialogue and the Co-Intelligence Institute to develop [seven core principles for public engagement](#):

1. **Careful planning and preparation:** Through adequate and inclusive planning, ensure that the design, organization, and convening of the process serve both a clearly defined purpose and the needs of the participants.
2. **Inclusion and demographic diversity:** Equitably incorporate diverse people, voices, ideas, and information to lay the groundwork for quality outcomes and democratic legitimacy.
3. **Collaboration and shared purpose:** Support and encourage participants, government and community institutions, and others to work together to advance the common good.
4. **Openness and learning:** Help all involved listen to each other, explore new ideas unconstrained by predetermined outcomes, learn and apply information in ways that generate new options, and rigorously evaluate public engagement activities for effectiveness.
5. **Transparency and trust:** Be clear and open about the process, and provide a public record of the organizers, sponsors, outcomes, and range of views and ideas expressed.
6. **Impact and action:** Ensure each participatory effort has real potential to make a difference, and that participants are aware of that potential.
7. **Sustained engagement and participatory culture:** Promote a culture of participation with programs and institutions that support ongoing quality public engagement.

We believe these principles, while they do overlap with our own framework, provide some guidelines with a broader focus on partnerships and collaboration with stakeholders.