

Creating Opportunities for Understanding

Insights for communicating with neighbors and community stakeholders

Developing a greater awareness of the range of neighborhood knowledge about the issue can help you develop communications that increase both understanding and trust.

Proactive neighborhood outreach

Neighbors bring different life experiences and knowledge to the topics of housing and mobility. Communications can be more effective when they build on these starting points. Find occasions in the community to hear from a wide array of neighbors:

- How are people affected by the issues of housing and mobility?
- What hopes do they have for the future of their neighborhood?
- What are they concerned about?
- What questions do they have?
- What information do they need?



Although housing and mobility affect everyone, impacts are not experienced equally. Individual groups and neighborhoods have their own unique histories with these issues. During outreach, pay attention to the stories that people share:

- What is the neighborhood's story?
- Is there a prevailing narrative or diversity of experiences?
- How has the neighborhood changed over time?
- What history and values are important to people?

Outreach timing and tone

Engage with residents early on in the process and offer meaningful opportunities for input along the way. We may feel pressured to have a fully developed plan before reaching out, but this can limit the ways people participate. Offer enough time for many people to contribute and for their feedback to help shape the direction of the project. Be curious; genuinely listen to learn. Lead with “neighbor” language that is accessible to everyone. Limit information that is technical or legal.

Responsive information design

Adjust the information you provide based on what you hear during outreach. During our work throughout San Mateo County, community members have frequently asked for more information about what's happening. They want to know where we are, how we got here and where we're going. Provide basic background information about “what is” and what's being considered.

Use community language when possible (i.e. the phrases they use to describe a given situation). Use community values to explain the reasons for policies or decisions. Work with community partners or neighborhood leaders to test draft communications with users before sharing more broadly. Revise or add to information based on what you hear.



Take time to find the right frames

When reaching out to neighbors, remember that **it's not just what you say – it's how you say it**.

Communications should be framed in a way that activates shared values and common identities. Asking people what they care about or what they value in their community are not just feel-good exercises. Use what you hear when communicating back to residents. Remind people of the things they think are important, including examples of how they have worked together in the past. Framing concepts to keep in mind include:

- Connect broadly held values, such as safety, security and diversity to actions on housing, parking and mobility.
- Emphasize interdependence and community connections. Avoid binary or zero-sum thinking that emphasizes competition between groups.
- Help people to see how proposed actions will benefit the entire neighborhood or broader community.

For more information on framing, see Framework's Institute's framing playbook and report on housing message backfires.



Use language that everyone can understand

Write for the broadest audience possible. Use the principles of Plain Language to maximize accessibility and help all community members to participate. Work with a trusted, experienced translator to address the needs of non-English speakers. When writing, remember to:

- Keep sentences as short as possible, while retaining meaning
- Use words that are familiar to many audiences
- Be careful with metaphors and idioms (check cultural fit)
- Use bullet points, tables and graphics when possible
- If you have to use a word that your audience might not understand, provide a definition or example



Channels are as import as content

When your goals are to increase comprehension and trust, who delivers a message can be as important as the message itself. How does information flow in the neighborhood? Make use of:

- Key connectors across demographics
- Newsletters, social media
- Gathering spots
- Annual events, etc.



Adapt the amount of information to the channel being used. Ask for feedback about the information being provided and adapt, as needed. This process will build good will as well as understanding.

By attending to neighbors' starting points, stories and information needs, you are investing in creating a constructive relationship for mutual benefit.