



PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT GUIDEBOOK





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COMMUNICATION & ENGAGEMENT GUIDE

Introduction

Utah was the fastest growing state in the nation over the past ten years, and that growth is continuing; we're on pace to nearly double in population in the next 30 years. That means the pressures that come with growth — and the sometimes difficult community conversations that accompany them — will be with us for some time. While the current attention of elected officials, community leaders and other key stakeholders along the Wasatch Front is rightfully directed primarily toward the impacts associated with the health, economic and other concerns brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the twin challenges of rapid growth and COVID-19 both require our attention. Addressing these challenges will require input from and collaboration with the residents across our communities. This guidebook was assembled to help those interactions happen more effectively.

[The Wasatch Choice Vision](#), a shared blueprint for transportation investments, development patterns and economic opportunities along the Greater Wasatch Front, provides a useful frame of reference as we consider short- and long-term impacts brought on by rapid growth and the pandemic. It was created with community input and buy-in prior to the pandemic, and its accompanying strategies can be a consistent reference point as we think about how we accomplish our shared interest of economic recovery and continued quality of life in the face of growth. These key strategies are:

- Provide transportation choices
- Support housing options
- Preserve open space
- Link economic development with transportation and housing decisions

Communication & Engagement Resources

This guide was developed as a resource to help community, regional and state leaders and staff develop and implement plans and policies that benefit from broad stakeholder ownership.

The guide contains resources organized around three main topics:

- **Public Engagement:** Process and tips for planning and executing effective dialogue and engagement with public groups.
- **One-on-One Engagement:** Tips and data to aid in having more effective conversations with individual members of the public on difficult topics.
- **Messaging:** Ready messaging for use in describing our challenges, and, when applicable, the role of the shared Wasatch Choice Vision in meeting them.

While the resources are perhaps most applicable to areas experiencing rapid growth, such as along the Wasatch Front, much of the material here could readily be modified and applied for specific use cases in other parts of the state. The Wasatch Choice partners' hope is that this material will be helpful to many. Also of note, this guide could readily be applied by individuals and organizations beyond government. The private sector, non-profit entities or any other organization that regularly engages with members of the public in making collective decisions may find this guide useful.

Potential applications include:

- **Working with your community to craft a long-term city or county general plan.**
- **Engaging the public about a proposed development within a community.**
- **Having dialogue with particular stakeholder groups around housing as you try to respond to legislative requirements.**
- **Resolving concerns with a neighborhood about a proposed transportation project.**
- **And many, many more.**

Overall, the aim of this resource is simple: To support community conversations about the future to accelerate recovery and promote sustained quality of life along the Wasatch Front.



FUNDAMENTALS OF GREAT PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



FUNDAMENTALS OF GREAT PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Audiences

The audience for this guidebook includes local, regional, or state leaders and staff that develop plans and policies that affect land development, local infrastructure, and the creation of parks and open space. Many of the concepts here may also be helpful when specific development or infrastructure projects are being considered. For those cases, the private sector may also find the guidebook useful. This document is intended to be used as a guide with a set of suggestions that can help teams design an effective outreach process. The list format is a compendium of ideas compiled by the experiences among the Wasatch Choice partner agencies.

Goals of an Effective Public Process

1. Create plans and policies that benefit from broad support.
2. Gather representative input, including from historically underrepresented communities (ensure the loudest voices don't dominate the conversation).
3. Accomplish "hard" conversations that help lead to a thriving community.
4. Improve understanding of issues.
5. Increase shared respect and civility.
6. Consider the long-term health of the area in decisions, rather than only serving short-term concerns. Don't miss the bigger picture — "Think regionally, act locally."
7. Be ethically sound and respect existing laws and rights, including property rights.

As a region, it is imperative to get the public effectively involved and engaged in the decision-making process so that outcomes better reflect the combined values, desires, and perspectives of the community. Decisions that are backed by effective public involvement are more implementable and legitimate and are less subject to challenge. Demanding projects and policies require broad and long-term perspective and support in order to be accomplished. We see it all too often: Plans are made, ignored, and bypassed, and public input is misrepresented.

Why?



Often it is difficult to engage the public in long-term planning for the following reasons:

1. People focus more on the urgent issues of the moment, less on longer-term problems.
2. Participation is low, unless people have a direct stake in an outcome.
3. Regional impacts are often not considered in local decision making.
4. Public processes can be lengthy and expensive.
5. The level of controversy is high around accommodating growth pressures.
6. Negative messaging about the risks of change or growth can be contagious.
7. Traditional public hearing formats lend themselves to repeatedly magnify some voices rather than others.

Principles

1. **Trust and authenticity:**
 - a. Mutual trust is important to have meaningful and informative conversations.
 - i. Residents won't trust who they don't know. Seek out, find, and engage local community members to build trust and long-term relationships.
 - b. Trust the participants. Public engagement shouldn't "check a box." The public should drive the outcomes.
 - i. Enter into community engagement with the mindset that communities will assist in outlining what should happen.
 - ii. Remember that participants are the experts on their own experiences in their community. Learn about the community through them.
 - iii. Allow participants to define the outcomes they want for their community and utilize your expertise to help them get there.
 - c. Invite stakeholders to commit to be part of an objective and honest process, not to get behind a predefined solution. Develop solutions to community challenges with stakeholders.
 - d. Grant participants full dignity regardless of their background or education level and avoid legalese and jargon to assure understanding of the issues.
2. **Locally tailored processes and solutions:**
 - a. Each community is unique, and what works in one place may not work in another. Tailor your process to match the demographics and distinctive desires of the community.
3. **Collaboration and partnerships:**
 - a. Gather and partner with stakeholders from a broad cross-section of the community. Stakeholders help create public support for projects, spread the word about public outreach opportunities, and give insight into the community.
4. **Transparency:**
 - a. Make all findings and input publicly available.
 - b. Demonstrate a nexus between input and products.
 - c. Ensure predictability by clearly stating your process up front and adhering to it.
5. **Broad participation:**
 - a. A diversity of community members should be involved throughout the project; participation should be inclusive and representative of the community.
6. **Open-mindedness:**
 - a. Like trust, open-mindedness goes both ways. As a facilitator, respect and incorporate public comments despite your personal opinion or experience.
7. **Trusted Information:**
 - a. Before embarking on a public process, have an internal conversation to determine the following:
 - i. Which community groups and/or residents need to be engaged? Who can provide the most useful information and data?
 - ii. What information is available, useful, and valid? (stories vs. numbers, quantity vs. quality, etc.)
 - iii. Whose information is available, useful, and valid? (children, underrepresented groups, gung-ho meeting attendant, etc.)
 - iv. Where is available, useful, and valid community information found? (social media, email, public meeting comments, etc.)

For additional principles, ethics, and standards of practice, consult the International Association for Public Participation (iap2.org), the American Planning Association (planning.org), or the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (ncdd.org).



PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

Structuring the Process: Invest in Long-range Visioning and Planning

Investing in robust public outreach and a growth conversation around a vision and general plan is essential for a city to thrive over the long term. A vision is the foundation for a city to establish goals, strategies, and community desires. Once a vision is established, the general plan can call for specific principles and zoning to provide desired outcomes that reflect the vision. A well-designed general plan, driven by community needs and desires, will strive to be compatible with the entire region as well as each individual neighborhood. Once the general plan is vetted and adopted, a city should strive to adhere to it. To achieve the public buy-in necessary for the general plan to truly guide decision making, robust public engagement is essential in the plan's creation.

Structure the process to address long-term regional growth consequences, not just the near-term adjacent consequences. Begin planning efforts and outreach with a foundation of background and educational information about regional growth and key issues. Understand regional growth projections including, but not limited to:

1. How much population growth is anticipated?
2. Is the demand created by growth homogeneous across the landscape or concentrated in one community?
3. Is growth a result of internal birth rates or immigration? Does that matter?

Have conversations about regional and/or cross-jurisdictional issues. Don't assume the world ends at city boundaries. People, economics, and environments are not tied to boundaries. We interact with built environments across boundaries and visioning efforts should take this into consideration.

Recommended Outreach Process for Visioning and Long-range Planning

1. **Gathering data phase:** Understand who lives in the community and who would like to live in the community, what the growth projections are, whether there's housing that matches the wages of the jobs in the community, what people most like and want to protect about the community, and what the challenges are going to be (traffic, affordability, etc.).
 - a. Begin conversations after setting the groundwork that regional growth is a given.
2. **Listening phase:** What do people care about, what ideas do they have, what does the community value?
 - a. Learning about the values a community shares helps build consensus around the issues and priorities that the visioning process should address. Values research helps create dialogue and enables communication about the process using the community's words. The goal is not just to understand the community's immediate goals, but to understand what is motivating those goals — what do residents really want?
 - b. Qualitative input methods (interviews, focus groups, discussion boards, etc.) allow you to understand the breadth of issues, the universe of ideas for addressing them, the language people use, why people care about the issues they cite, and the emotions/values that are involved.
 - c. Quantitative input methods (surveys) allow you to understand the relative importance of issues across the population.
 - d. It's critical to get input from underrepresented groups at this stage.

3. **Scenarios phase:** Present choices and get feedback on the direction.
 - a. Scenarios provide a means to envision potential future changes based on various factors. Alternative scenarios can test how various growth, transportation, economic development, and environmental ideas might affect the future of a community or region.
 - b. Look long-term to understand how people envision their future, rather than focusing solely on today's decisions. Choose a time horizon for your planning/visioning process that looks at what your community might be like in 10, 25, or even 50 years.
 - i. Communicate that tomorrow's issues will be different than today's and yesterday's issues. What will be affordable, what will be an easy commute, etc., will change with time.
 - ii. Rather than comparing future conditions against today, compare alternative futures to each other.
 - c. Use a "baseline" scenario that projects current trends or plans forward.
 - i. A baseline scenario tells a story of how regions and communities may change over time if current policies and practices continue — a.k.a., continuing business as usual. Providing a baseline scenario helps participants in a visioning process ask themselves if the community is heading toward its desired future. A baseline provides a point of reference to compare alternative ideas that the public is interested in exploring.
 - d. Explore the various factors that impact the issues that are important to people in the community through scenarios.
 - i. Scenarios are developed by identifying common themes, ideas, and trends that arise through the listening phase. Ensure scenarios paint plausible futures and explore key choices, such as transportation investments or development patterns. Remember regional infrastructure plans in your scenarios such as road, transit, and water plans.
 - ii. Analyze each scenario for its impacts on the issues that are most important to people. How might each scenario affect housing affordability, traffic, walkability, or other factors that matter?
 - iii. Explore trade-offs of decisions, and don't sugarcoat what trade-offs entail. Underselling any downside to an issue will be seen as disingenuous. When decisions are made with eyes wide open it is easier to address criticism now or later.
 - e. Never assume growth will just disappear — or that it needs to go somewhere other than here.
 - i. With rapid population growth in Utah, change in our communities is not only inevitable, it is constant. If residents do not want to accommodate growth in their community in one or more scenarios, make sure your scenario analysis accounts for that growth going elsewhere — along with the attendant impacts on your community and region.
 - ii. Ask what the impacts are when other communities make decisions to shift the burden of growth onto other neighboring communities.
 - f. Get public feedback on the scenarios to understand what people like and don't like, and make sure the feedback is representative.
4. **Vision phase:** Draft a vision and strategies.
 - a. Craft a vision based on what people really want.
 - i. Visions should incorporate popular elements from each scenario; no one scenario should be selected unless one receives overwhelming support.
 - b. Include publicly supportable strategies that will achieve what people want.
 - i. Including strategies helps take the vision from idealistic to achievable. Strategies help guide policy makers and stakeholders as they implement the vision through avenues such as zoning changes. Putting the vision into practice is the overall goal of a visioning project.

Stakeholder Engagement Considerations

1. **Create a stakeholder group through stakeholder mapping. Stakeholder mapping includes asking yourself:**
 - a. Who has the influence or power to make things happen? Who ought to have more influence?
 - b. Who can help connect you to various communities to increase participation?
 - c. Who has a different/unique voice that you need to hear?
 - d. Who has property rights that need to be considered?
 - e. Who are the representatives of those who are affected or who are typically underrepresented in planning discussions?
 - f. Who has expertise to lend?
 - g. How can we make our stakeholder group representative of the community?
 - h. Who might be affected (positively or negatively), even if beyond city boundaries?
2. **The role of stakeholders includes:**
 - a. Helping ensure transparency and integrity are maintained throughout the process (the community and stakeholders must believe in or even feel ownership of the process if they are to believe in or feel ownership of the outcomes).
 - b. Being trusted champions in the community.
 - c. Helping get the word out about the project and public input opportunities.
 - d. Helping identify choices/scenarios and their impacts.
 - e. Helping develop strategies to achieve outcomes consistent with what the public values most both now and in the long term.
3. **Stakeholders should be representative of the community.**
 - a. Avoid working only with the same stakeholders again and again — diversify and expand.
 - b. Strive for high-level, multi-sector participation to ensure well-rounded discussions.
4. **Invite your critics to be part of the process to ensure you have everyone at the table.**
 - a. A stakeholder group is not a coalition with a common agenda but a collaboration of all affected parties.
 - b. A stakeholder group can become a group of “no” if engagement isn’t robust.
 - c. The group provides an opportunity for people to discuss contrasting opinions, learn together, and find common ground.
5. **Each project or community is different, but this list of types of stakeholders will get you started in your thinking:**
 - a. Leaders from diverse and underrepresented communities
 - b. Religious communities
 - c. Neighborhood/community councils, HOAs, etc.
 - d. Major landowners
 - e. Realtors
 - f. Developers
 - g. Businesses
 - h. Advocacy organizations
 - i. Non-profits
 - j. Chambers of commerce
 - k. Large employers
 - l. Elected and appointed officials
 - m. Transportation agencies
 - n. Schools
 - o. Utility providers



WAYS TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

Provide Engagement Opportunities With Easy Participation

1. **Repetition:** One opportunity is rarely sufficient, whether due to conflicting obligations or barriers in the effectiveness of that opportunity (such as lack of trust). Providing multiple opportunities conveys true interest in hearing input and enables more people to participate.
2. **Choice:** Offer multiple ways to engage, as different opportunities are more or less attractive to different people. Offering multiple ways to engage, such as online surveys and in-person open houses, encourages everyone from a tech guru to a person without internet access to participate, and allows for participation that is convenient and effective for different people. Offer a remote component to every engagement opportunity.
3. **Accessibility:** Consider barriers to access. These include various disabilities, limited internet or technology capabilities, childcare needs, language differences, lack of availability at various times of the day, and others. The first step to breaking down barriers to access is identifying them before the engagement.
4. **Location:** Engage people in neutral and inclusive locations where they are comfortable. Unfamiliar or formal settings (such as city hall) can invoke unease. Additionally, the further the location of engagement is from a community, the less likely it is for robust engagement to occur. Familiar settings promote comfort, and settings within the community convey that the community is in control of their future. Furthermore, going to the community takes effort, which conveys genuine interest in engagement.
5. **Brevity:** Choose formats that take very little time. Less than five minutes is ideal for many types of engagement.
6. **Moderation:** To moderate effectively, make sure those who are not the loudest voices can be more active in the conversation. Choose formats that allow everyone to give equal input and use quantitative research to understand how the majority feels.
7. **Input:** Use both qualitative input methods (for breadth and depth of input) and quantitative input methods (for numbers and representation).
8. **Information:** Make information about progress easily accessible. This way, people can jump into engagement at any point with an understanding of prior accomplishments.

Be Inclusive

1. **Think about groups who don't have the same volume of voice as other groups. Some groups to consider are:**
 - a. Low-income people
 - b. Young people
 - c. Renters
 - d. People of color
 - e. Recent immigrants
 - f. Diverse ethnicities
 - g. People who speak English as a second language
 - h. People who work in your community (and might live there if they could)
 - i. People with disabilities
 - j. Seniors
 - k. People new to the community

2. **Seek to have an inclusive and representative planning commission and city council.**
3. **Build relationships with community leaders—trusted voices who can help connect you to people and get the word out about engagement opportunities.**
4. **Build relationships with underrepresented communities.**
5. **Consider using incentives (stipends or prize drawings) to encourage people to participate.**
6. **Watch your language—provide translations, use approachable and plain language, etc.**

Communicate and Share Information

Get the word out, even if it takes time and money, through:

1. **Earned media (news stories)**
2. **Social media**
3. **Paid advertising**
4. **Community partners**
5. **Signs and flyers**
6. **Mailers**
7. **Events**
8. **Community events such as farmers markets with materials/surveys/interview questions**
9. **Incentives including stipends and prize drawings**

Types of Engagement Meetings and Opportunities

1. **Participants should solve problems, not just vote against proposals.** Use outreach methods beyond just the public hearing. Ask participants to solve problems, not state which “side” they are on. Use formats that allow for a conversation and problem solving rather than just “putting your voice on the record.”
2. **Implement multiple methods of engagement in order to reach diverse audiences.** Different methods of engagement require variable time, effort, and money. Different methods of engagement attract different people with different perspectives. Different methods of engagement require us to facilitate in different ways.
3. **Below are some common methods used for public engagement, but it is not an exhaustive list.** There is always room for creativity and innovation to engage meaningfully with the community.
 - a. In-person:
 - i. Working group
 - ii. Advisory groups and task forces
 - iii. Pop-ups, hosting table at community-run event
 - iv. Door to door
 - v. Workshops
 - vi. Charrettes
 - vii. Delphi Method*
 - viii. City walks, walkabouts, Jane Jacobs Walks
 - ix. Open space
 - x. World Cafe**
 - xi. Consensus building and facilitation
 - xii. Surveys
 - xiii. Interviews
 - xiv. Focus groups
 - xv. Public meeting
 - xvi. Public hearing
 - xvii. Open house
 - b. Online:
 - i. Video meetings (determine if spoken or written comments are allowed)
 - ii. Discussion boards
 - iii. Surveys
 - iv. Comment forms

*An interactive process for arriving at group consensus or mutual agreement.

**Engage groups of people in meaningful conversations centered around one topic or series of topics/questions. Learn more at <http://www.theworldcafe.com>



COMMUNICATIONS, FACILITATION AND HANDLING CONFLICTS

Communicating With Individuals and Groups

How we communicate and interact influences the quality of the engagement. Getting the public, especially diverse and underrepresented groups, to show up does not guarantee a successful process. How leaders behave can welcome people to fully participate or convey that their ideas may not be heard. Moderation styles set the tone for all present and indicate how receptive leaders are to ideas and perspectives, which influences what participants are willing to share. Dealing with conflict is one of the biggest challenges to effective moderation and thus effective engagement.

1. **Use effective moderation strategies.**

- a. Establish ground rules with the group at the beginning of the meeting or process.
 - i. Reference objective ground rules to deal with behavior, rather than have it come across as staff versus the troublemaker(s).
 - ii. Consider establishing talking time limits. While these are good for control, they can silence or limit productive ideas, so use this strategy with discretion.
- b. Be comfortable with calling out bad behavior if it happens. For strategies to deal with conflict and troublemakers in meetings and events, see *Dealing with Difficult People - PON*, a blog run by The Harvard Program on negotiation.
- c. Establish a “parking lot” of ideas. At the beginning of each meeting, show where this list will be recorded (whiteboard, document, etc.). When an important item not on the agenda is brought up, record the item under the “parking lot” with the date it was mentioned. Schedule this item for another meeting and direct the group back to the agenda. This strategy keeps track of important ideas and validates participants, and the follow-through of the parking lot establishes trust.
- d. Use reframing and reflecting. When someone makes an unhelpful, positional statement, reframe the statement in terms of their interest. For example, if Maria says, “Commercial properties always bring crime,” the moderator can reframe as: “I hear that Maria cares a lot about safety in her neighborhood. Am I hearing you correctly Maria?”

2. **Educate and inform first so that people can effectively participate.**

- a. Establish a shared understanding of regional growth projections and the challenges the community faces.

3. **Listen to and understand the issues that are important to people.**

- a. Understanding the issues is the first step to answering the question, “What does the community really want and how can this planning work serve that?” To understand the issues, ask questions, follow-up questions, and clarifying questions. Avoid making assumptions. Once planners have a better understanding of the impacts of their decisions, they are able to reevaluate those decisions to determine if the community is headed toward a common desired future.
- b. Consider whether someone’s statement is a position or an interest. A position is a specific statement with little room for movement. An interest is the underlying reason; it is the “why” behind the position. While a position shuts down conversation and solution-finding, an interest can be met through multiple strategies, thus it opens the door to find mutually beneficial solutions.
 - i. Example position: “Street trees are unacceptable; I can’t stand that the city keeps planting them.”
Underlying interest: “Well, they look beautiful, but they block visibility, and I worry about cars seeing all the neighborhood kids playing.” With the underlying interest revealed, mutually acceptable solutions, such as better maintenance of low hanging branches and distancing trees from intersections, could be found.

- c. What are the consequences, emotions, and values that make the issues important to people? What are they really trying to achieve?
 - i. One of the biggest challenges in planning is developing and then building consensus around a plan. Competing personalities, agendas, and politics quickly begin to erode direction and momentum. A plan built upon the personal values of the people living in the region removes much of the personality and politics and provides critical legitimacy to the direction and priorities of the plan. It's not about doing what this person or that group wants; it's about doing what the people value most and what the future demands.
4. **Speak in ways consistent with underlying values.**
- a. Values are broadly shared. While people may disagree over short-term policy decisions, they tend to agree on the ultimate ends to achieve.
 - b. Uncovering values requires understanding not just the attributes of their communities that people like or don't like, such as traffic, expensive housing, or good neighbors, but also:
 - i. The functional consequences those attributes provide in their lives (e.g., less traffic may allow them to waste less time traveling and spend more time with their friends and family).
 - ii. The psychological and emotional consequences (e.g., they may feel less stress).
 - iii. The ultimate values residents are seeking to serve (e.g., peace of mind).
 - c. Primary values Utahns relate to:
 - i. Friendly neighbors with similar values who create a safe environment to raise children and an overall sense of community, promoting peace, and personal security.
 - ii. Good paying jobs coupled with a low cost of living, generating more income to buy more and do more. Residents can provide for their families, giving a sense of financial security while making things better for future generations.
 - iii. Scenic beauty and outdoor recreation that provide abundant opportunities for quality time to enjoy with friends and family. Being active outdoors helps to promote healthier living, personal enjoyment, and happiness.
 - iv. Find Utah values studies here: <https://envisionutah.org/tools>.
 - d. Speaking at the level of benefits and emotions builds common ground and emotional buy-in. For example, rather than talking solely about mixed use zoning, it is more powerful to talk about having amenities and services nearby so that people can save time, allowing them to do other things and have less stress.
 - e. Word choices matter. Residents may view some concepts and terms as more consistent with their values than others. For example, talking about "equal opportunity for all" is more powerful than talking about "equity." Similarly, "mass transit" has negative connotations compared to "public transportation."
5. **Make issues relevant to people's lives.**
- a. Always strive to humanize the discussion. Rather than talking about planning concepts, talk about the issues that matter to people's lives. Will your children be able to afford a place to live? Will we be able to breathe clean air? Will we be able to get around without spending hours in a car? Will we have enough water to accommodate our future needs? With an understanding of the issues that matter, you can frame events towards your target audience.
6. **Use easy-to-understand metrics.**
- a. Metrics help transform complicated planning concepts into a set of numbers that can be used to tell a relevant story. Metrics could include things like how much time people will have to spend in traffic, or how much a new home would cost.
7. **Use good visualizations.**
- a. Visualizations make it easier for people to understand complicated information. Good data visualizations should message the information in a clear and concise way to make it easy to understand patterns and trends so that the public can formulate their own opinions and come away with a clear understanding of the situation.

8. Use an approachable tone and simple language.

- a. Avoid jargon, acronyms, and complicated language. For the public to be involved, information should be presented in an easy-to-understand and accessible way. Using plain language often helps the public understand complicated planning concepts and invites the public into the conversation rather than intimidating them.
- b. Consider when open-ended questions or yes/no questions are more appropriate. Are general ideas and perspectives on an issue sought? Or, is specific feedback sought? Avoid unconsciously asking “leading” questions (questions that suggest the desired answer).
- c. Avoid asking technical questions when possible. Instead, focus on uncovering values that will be used to inform what technical questions should be asked of staff.
- d. Think about tone. Positive words such as thriving, special, close-knit, community, and prospering are encouraged. Generally, aim for an approachable, amenable, and confident tone and avoid sounding aggressive, patronizing, bored, or unsure. Consider how the use of “we/our” versus “you/I” sets the tone for collaboration versus contention.
- e. Use words and ideas that are comfortable to the community. This requires working with a community member to understand their language before the engagement (e.g., whether a community identifies as “rural” versus “small-town” versus “farming community”).

Why Follow-through Matters

Engagement needs to come full circle. When people take time to share and contribute to our processes and project, we should let them know how their feedback was used. With follow-up, we establish trust and encourage future engagement.

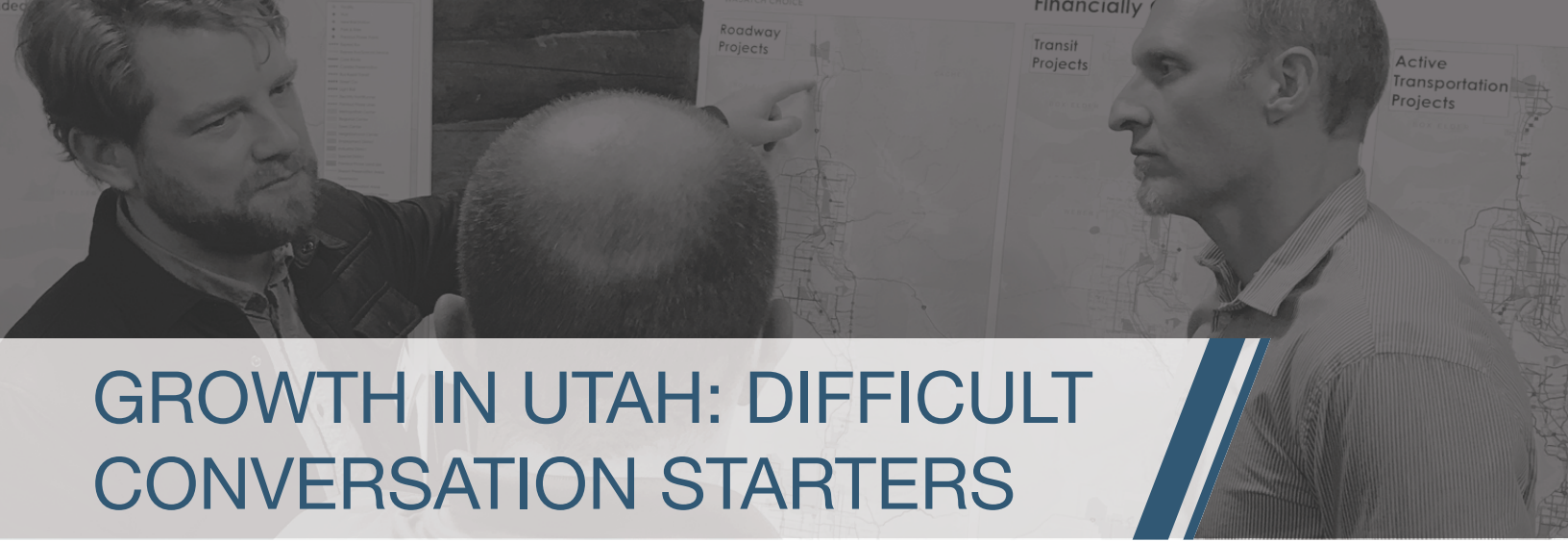
Ideas for how to do it:

Communicate back to residents how their feedback was used.

- Share reports/summaries through social media channels (both your own organization and the community’s local channels), updates at council meetings, and project websites. Collect emails during events and then send reports to those who shared emails.
- Be transparent about what was heard, what feedback was and was not incorporated, and why.
- Provide information about next steps.
- Invite continued participation when appropriate.

An aerial photograph of a city in Utah, likely Salt Lake City, showing a mix of urban buildings and open land. A large, prominent rock formation is visible in the foreground on the left. The background features rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark blue banner at the bottom.

GROWTH IN UTAH: DIFFICULT CONVERSATION STARTERS



GROWTH IN UTAH: DIFFICULT CONVERSATION STARTERS

Introduction

Growth pressures — and the difficult conversations that accompany them — are no stranger to local elected officials, staff and other community leaders and stakeholders. Conducting growth conversations in a constructive way can be a real challenge, particularly when emotion is strong and stakes are high.

What follows here is a collection of growth topics, grouped by broad categories, that often come up in discussion. Although every situation has its own unique context, the example statements and facts provided are a potential first step to structure the conversation in a positive way. We've also provided some overall tips or themes to consider in the broader categories.

Listen. Learn. Lead.

Before proceeding with some suggested content for your conversations, the below conversation model provides a simple set of steps to think through as you navigate difficult conversations with your stakeholders.

Listen

Start by letting the community member talk.

Listen openly for what might be motivating the question or opinion.

Learn

Engage in back and forth dialogue.

Ask probing questions.

Lead

Share your understanding of the topic.

Speak factually and reference sources as appropriate.

Identify a next step to close the conversation.

General Tips for Having Difficult Conversations

- Identify and leverage community champions. These 'champions' do not necessarily need to be elected officials.
- Proactively convey the positive aspects of the story rather than allowing the narrative to spin toward the negative.
- Include data in the conversation to keep it as factual as possible.
 - Look at numbers on a per-capita basis to show a true comparison of statistics.
 - Be conversational with data.
- Don't be afraid to be light-hearted; use humor when appropriate.
- Involve interested residents. Explain the constraints and then ask the question "How would you tackle the issue?"
- Use empathetic words: "I hear you"; "That sounds difficult"; "I worry about that too". Especially when emotions are high; data may not help in these situations.
- Bring a "high road" approach to the conversation. If your attitude is positive and solution-oriented, it helps the conversation go better.

Growth & Planning

General Tips & Ideas

- Growth and change are not new, they are constant.
- A simple way to think about growth in a positive way is this: “Growth planning is ‘quality of life planning.’”
- Begin with the idea that growth is not an **if** but a **how**.
 - Utah’s high quality of life means our children and grandchildren often want to remain here to raise their own families.
 - Additionally, many from other states recognize the opportunities and benefits Utah offers and relocate here.
 - Trying to stop growth by not zoning for it doesn’t make the people who want to live here disappear. It just means they have fewer places to live, which means prices go up for everybody. It also means we don’t plan very effectively for how to accommodate that growth in ways that maintain a high quality of life.
 - As such, we are better served spending time on how to grow well, in ways that align with our community values, than trying to stop growth altogether.
- In accommodating growth, communities must balance positive outcomes for all.

Example Statements of Commonly Heard Concerns

“If our community says no to growth, the impacts of that growth will also disappear from our community.”

Potential Responses

- People don’t disappear just because we don’t allow the market to build places for them in our community. Growth typically doesn’t retreat; it just relocates. If it isn’t in our community it will be in the next closest spot where it is allowed.
- When growth moves across the city/county/other border, the impacts such as traffic do not stay on that side of the border. In fact the relocation of growth to another location could cause impacts to grow.
- Planning for and working proactively to manage growth allows us to get maximum benefit from the growth while minimizing negative impacts.
- Right here in our city, we have young people that are starting their life trying to find the first place they will live, and older folks looking to retire without having to leave the community they love. Providing housing choices is about helping the families in our community meet the needs of the life stages they are in.
- Growth is happening in our area in part because of big families who want to live near extended family.

Tips & Facts

- Many local officials have found it useful to equip themselves with localized data about growth (population projections, stats and figures related to crime, housing, and transportation data, etc.).
- The majority of Utah’s growth is our own children and grandchildren, as Utah has the highest birth rate in the nation. We also have many people who relocate to Utah from other states to capitalize on Utah’s strong economy and high quality of life. Many of those who join us from out of state already have ties to Utah through family or friends, or because they grew up here.
- As most officials and staff are aware, we are not likely to stop growth. Our best approach is to proactively plan for and manage it to our benefit. Trying to shift the conversation to a solution-finding direction (i.e., “If we are unable to stop growth from happening, how might we plan to best accommodate it without harming the things we love about Utah like the outdoors or our ability to move around pretty freely?”).

“I don’t want any more growth in my community - if we don’t plan for it, it won’t come to my area.”

Potential Responses

- Much of Utah’s growth comes from internal increase—our large family sizes and a desire for children and grandchildren to live nearby.
- Growth rates are difficult to control unless quality of life is so bad that people no longer want to live here.
- Since we can probably agree that we don’t want to harm our current quality of life in an effort to thwart growth, a more constructive way to look at it is to ask how and where growth should occur.
- If our community thinks “it may make sense for growth and moderately priced housing to occur somewhere, just not here”, how can we expect the nearby communities to think any differently?
- We can ask ourselves, if we don’t provide an opportunity for growth in the location being considered, what is the next most likely place for that growth to occur? What will the impacts be on those households — will they be better or worse off? For example: Further from jobs? Further from transit? The location of where growth should occur matters.

Tips & Facts

- To help the resident think longer term, you might ask if they have children or grandchildren and where they would like them to live. Personalizing growth can change the nature of the conversation.

“Until there’s enough infrastructure in my area, we shouldn’t have more growth here.”

Potential Responses

- You are right. Strategic growth should include many different facets to maximize quality of life for our residents, including planning for infrastructure. Help me understand what infrastructure we are lacking and how we might address it.
- The opportunity for all of our residents to have housing, to get around easily, and to have access to grocery stores, child care and economic opportunities will enhance quality of life for all residents.
- As appropriate, talk about the specific things in the community such as infrastructure or shopping opportunities that would help the community handle growth.
- As we think about how best to manage growth rather than how to stop it, we can build a community that supports high quality of life and opportunities for current and future residents.

Tips & Facts

- Explain that developers are often required to install infrastructure as part of the development approval process.
- Ask about the individual’s expectations for infrastructure improvements since they moved into the area. This may help trace back sources such as previous plans or developer promises that are in various stages of implementation.
- Be willing to speak openly about plans or promises that have and haven’t come to pass, along with why.
- Complaints about lack of infrastructure can open up a conversation about regional systems and connectivity.

Housing & Density

General Tips & Ideas

- If planned for at a community scale, providing opportunities for more growth to occur in downtowns or smaller town centers within a community preserves land for larger lots, rural uses, and open or recreational space. More intense forms of growth don't need to be everywhere, but allowing them to happen in a few strategic locations will help.
- A diversity of housing types is responsive to market trends, helps people with housing affordability, and also accommodates people in different life stages; all of which are valuable to a community.
 - Diverse housing choices to complement larger single family homes accommodates families just starting out, middle-aged families who are spreading out, empty nesters who might be downsizing, and senior citizens with particular needs.
- Remind people that everyone had to start somewhere. Consider asking, "Have you or anyone in your family ever rented?"
- When we plan housing or commercial space with transportation and economic development in mind, we get better outcomes such as shorter driving distances, more time at home, and reduced household expenses.
- The word "density" has an almost universally negative connotation. Find a word or term that resonates better with your particular community.
 - Name the form of housing rather than referring to density, e.g., "townhomes, condominiums, apartments."
 - Others have used terms such as multi-use development, walkable community¹, or transit-friendly development.
 - Or avoid focusing on density and instead focus on housing options and walkability.
- Share data and information about whether the people who work in or near the community can afford to live there. Remind them that forcing people to live farther from work causes more traffic and worse air quality for everybody.
- Many communities have found that involving the developer directly in planning efforts and conversations with citizens can be helpful. It allows them to speak on their own behalf and to potentially make concessions or adjustments elected officials and staff are not in a position to make.

Example Statements of Commonly Heard Concerns

"Higher density and growth means higher taxes for me."

Potential Responses

- More housing units take up less space and reduce many community costs by minimizing linear infrastructure such as roads, water lines, and utilities.
- The amount of infrastructure per household (the length of streets and pipes, power lines, sewer) and the distance traveled for trash pickup, snow removal, and emergency services is lower as the housing units per acre increases.
- Put more simply, when our growth footprint shrinks, it saves current residents money.

Tips & Facts

- The Wasatch Choice Vision — largely through planning for more centered growth in concert with transportation and economic development — is estimated to save taxpayers along the Wasatch Front nearly \$6 billion in infrastructure costs associated with growth. This includes cost savings on roads, sewer, water, and power.

¹ A walkable community is where lots of people live within an easy walk of other places and things. A walkable area brings homes and destinations close enough to each other such that more people are able to choose to walk.

“Multifamily housing (or apartments) increase traffic congestion and crime, reduce property values, and don’t meet our community character.”

Potential Responses

- Crime rates in the aggregate are not different per household for single family homes, townhomes, condos, or apartments.
- If we have a concern over more crime in multi-family housing, we can utilize tools like the good landlord program.²
- When centers are well planned — incorporating reliable transportation options, such as functional roads, transit connections, trails and bike lanes, and job and retail centers near housing — the opposite of these perceived negative outcomes is often true. Traffic congestion drops, property values rise and the character of the community in that specific location is enhanced.
- Nationally about 40% of homebuyers cite “being within an easy walk of other places and things...” as very important in choosing where to live.³ This is true of every demographic group except the Silent/Greatest generation and has held constant overall during COVID-19. This type of neighborhood, which includes apartments or smaller-lot homes close to a cluster of retail or restaurant space, for example, isn’t right for everyone, or even for most people, but there’s far more demand for it than supply.

Tips & Facts

- In a National Association of Realtors survey during COVID-19, people with places to walk remain more satisfied with their quality of life. A majority in the most walkable areas are very satisfied with their quality of life.
- Housing units, be they single family, condos or townhomes, near light rail command an 8% price premium in North America, an indication of its desirability or lack of supply.⁴
- A lack of housing leads to higher housing costs which displaces lower income households to more remote locations. This causes longer, more expensive, polluting commutes, and exacerbates traffic.

“Our city has enough/plenty of lower income/affordable housing. Citizens don’t want any more.”
...Or...

“The market, not the government, can fix/tackle the affordable housing crisis.”

Potential Responses

- What was affordable when you moved in or even five years ago is no longer affordable. Housing prices are currently increasing 7-8% per year, outpacing growth in incomes.
- Although it was recently the case that most people could afford a single family home, with significant housing price increases over the last decade we need to also provide more townhouses, condos and apartments, in addition to providing new single family homes. Many teachers, police officers, nurses, and others, may not be able to afford a standard single-family home.
- If all of the cities around us take a similar approach to not allowing more housing that is affordable for people with lower incomes, where will those with limited means be able to live?

Tips & Facts

- One in eight Utah homeowners below the median income is paying 50% or more of their income on housing. (source: Salt Lake Chamber)
- When compared to available housing, those you may not expect — our teachers, law enforcement, and firefighters — are those who cannot afford what used to be “affordable housing.”
- The market is demanding more multi-family and townhouse units. The Wasatch Choice Vision accounts for this shift in market demand. The Wasatch Choice Vision assumes that the percentage of multi-family and townhouse units built each year will gradually increase by 15%, but that the majority of all housing will still be single family at 60%.

2 Good landlord program tools 10-1-203.5 can be used to improve property management as needed.

3 <https://cdn.nar.realtor/sites/default/files/documents/2020-transportation-survey-analysis-slides.pdf>

4 https://ppms.trec.pdx.edu/media/project_files/TRB_2020_-_UU_1328_-_Impact_of_Transit_on_Multifamily_Property_Values_-_A_Meta-Analysis.pdf

Example Statements of Commonly Heard Concerns

“People in Utah don’t use transit, and with COVID, people are even less likely to ride the bus or train.”

Potential Responses

- Growth is still coming, and multiple means of getting around will be just as important in the future as it is now. We must look beyond the current pandemic to the needs of the future.
- While the pandemic may shift how we work, those shifts will be swallowed up by our rapid growth if we stay on our current path.
- More options — including transit and active transportation — will be needed to keep us moving.
- The rates of people who use transit to commute are significant to key destinations — pre-COVID-19 about 25% of workers who commuted downtown used transit, and about 40% to the University of Utah. If suburban areas develop their own downtowns or town centers, transit can help a lot of people commute in the suburbs as well. We have to make sure that these are still viable options in the future, especially as our population continues to grow.

Tips & Ideas

- Transportation planners at WFRC forecast that with more transit and active transportation options in the Wasatch Choice Vision, we could reduce projected increases in the time it takes to travel by car by 60%. For example, instead of 20 minutes more to get to where you need to go, perhaps it would only take 8 minutes more. Transit and bicycling help drivers as well as those that use transit and bikes.
- The Wasatch Choice Vision will increase access to transit by 37% and to safe and family-friendly bike facilities by 79%.

“Should we still invest in transit, given COVID and teleworking?”

Potential Responses

- Because of rapid growth — even accounting for an increase in telework because of the pandemic — we will still need an “all of the above” strategy, roadway improvements, transit that works for more people, safe bikeways, teleworking, and land use that allows people to live more of their life and meet more of their needs within their neighborhood.
- So, while transit use is down during the pandemic, we have to keep the long view, and plan and invest for continued growth and for the future of our communities.
- Transit moves people while utilizing less roadway space, helps them get to where they need to go with reduced user expense, and the trip is completed with fewer air emissions. These dynamics don’t change because of COVID-19.
- As housing costs increase, residents may increasingly look for other ways to reduce expenses. Replacing some trips with transit or eliminating the need for maintaining multiple vehicles may help with household affordability.
- Residents value transportation choices. Nationally, in the midst of the pandemic, a third of homebuyers placed a high value on having public transportation nearby when choosing where to live.⁵
- As the fastest growing state in the nation, transit investment is needed to meet projected growth from Utah’s birthrate and in-migration as people seek relative stability and quality of life.

Tips & Ideas

- Prior to the pandemic, transportation officials projected a 162% increase in transit ridership as a result of plans like the Wasatch Choice Vision being implemented.
- Transit may be the only means of transportation for some, including lower-income people who contribute to the economy or the elderly who can no longer drive.

⁵ <https://cdn.nar.realtor/sites/default/files/documents/2020-transportation-survey-analysis-slides.pdf>

“Doesn’t lower density mean less traffic?”

Potential Responses

- Single family homes are a valued part of our community, but they do spread people out which means they have to drive farther to get where they need to go. And if we don’t accommodate workforce housing in some places in our community, it will be built farther away — maybe in the next valley over — which means people will have to drive a lot farther. That means more traffic, more air pollution, and more household expenses.
- Making sure we create opportunities for housing to be built near jobs, shopping, and good transportation infrastructure reduces how much people need to drive.

Tips & Ideas

- Research shows that when workforce housing is closer to jobs and vice versa driving distances per household fall.⁶

⁶ Ewing, Reid and Cervero, Robert(2010) ‘Travel and the Built Environment’, Journal of the American Planning Association, First published on: 11 May 2010



KEY MESSAGES

KEY MESSAGES

As immediate- and short-term data shows — and as our collective experience is demonstrating daily — life has been changed and will continue to be changed by the global coronavirus pandemic.

- How we get around, how and where we work or go to school, how we buy things, how we guard our health, and how we gather in communities have all changed.
- People are feeling all sorts of effects from this change, and we cannot lose sight of that in the short term.
- Economic and fiscal disruptions have created hardship and uncertainty for many families, businesses, and governments.

While our attention as a community is rightfully turned to pressing health, economic and other issues related to COVID-19, growth pressures are still with us.

- A major national real estate market firm (John Burns) currently shows Salt Lake City metro as the strongest residential market in the United States. This includes the highest housing price appreciation in the US.
- Even in the midst of a global pandemic, one Utah homebuilder recently reported they had their largest May ever in 2020.
- While most of the growth Utah is experiencing is internal — our own children and grandchildren — Utah will remain a magnet for in-migration as well, because people are attracted to Utah's relative economic resiliency.
- Challenges of growth, including housing affordability, traffic congestion and air quality are not gone; they are just not the current focus.

While there is no question the pandemic has brought a number of negative consequences, it is also an opportunity to think differently about how we do things in the face of growth.

- As we consider the many changes happening around us, this time offers a chance to think deeply about the future of our communities.
- This reflection is not just an opportunity, but a necessity. Things will be different after this. How do we best prepare for and accommodate that?
- Local communities have real, meaningful decisions to make now that will shape the economies and quality of life in their communities for the future.

In this time of uncertainty and change, we should consider how short-term changes may affect our long-term community outcomes.

- How might we sustain the reduction in emissions brought on by widespread telework?
- How can we rethink our communities after observing the rapid and tremendous increase in use of trails and open space by Utahns?
- How do our commercial areas add to the vitality of our communities even with less brick and mortar retail and more online commerce?

Even though growth challenges remain, and are compounded by the pandemic, we have a plan. The Wasatch Choice Vision provides a useful frame of reference as we consider these and other questions.

- The Wasatch Choice was created with community input and buy-in prior to the pandemic and represents a shared vision for our future.
- The Vision and its accompanying strategies can be a consistent reference point as we think about how we accomplish our shared interest of economic recovery and continued quality of life in the face of growth.
- The Vision is based on patterns of development and infrastructure designed and located to fit well with each other, recognizing that where transportation facilities, housing, and economic opportunities are located matters. Access to these opportunity centers is critical for economic opportunities.
- This fundamental approach holds even with the shifts we are seeing from COVID-19.

While there is no one-size-fits all approach to addressing growth challenges, the key strategies of the Wasatch Choice Vision provide basic building blocks for post-pandemic community solutions.

- Provide transportation choices - one example the pandemic has demonstrated is a need for additional investment and focus on active transportation.
- Support housing options - as we recover, keeping a diverse set of housing options for people with varying preferences, at different life stages, and different income levels, will be even more important than prior to the pandemic.
- Preserve open space - the pandemic clearly showed the need for recreation areas not just in the mountains or in large recreation sites, but in the form of parks and trails closer to home.
- Link Economic Development with Transportation and Housing Decisions - enabling a shorter travel time saves both time and money, which results in a better quality of life overall.