

Virtual Engagement

Success Stories from the Field

By Alaina Brandenburger



When the world shut down due to COVID-19, some agencies chose to pause their planning projects until they could reopen, others moved forward. Having worked remotely since 2010, GreenPlay was able to pivot quickly, shifting community and stakeholder engagement from in-person to online. We used tools like Zoom and Bang the Table to move forward with the public input process on many different projects and have found that in some cases, these tools allowed us to engage people who would not normally attend public meetings. Here is how a virtual engagement process has worked on many of our projects.

Fairbanks North Star Borough, Alaska – Market Analysis and Feasibility Study for the Carlson Center

This project consisted of a market analysis and feasibility study for an existing multipurpose recreation center in Fairbanks, Alaska. To help determine the best uses for the center, our team conducted a community and stakeholder engagement process that included two Zoom public forums.

Over 100 people participated in these interactive public webinars. Our team was able to assess participant responses to determine that community members wanted a community recreation center with sports and other recreational activities. Our team then recommended that the Borough should use existing meetings to host both meetings and programs and that the center should be renovated to better meet community needs.

The team found public input participants to be highly engaged in the process. The online aspect allowed our project manager to facilitate a conversation using chat tools, and other Zoom features that help involve users.

Brighton, Colorado – Parks and Recreation Master Plan

In 2020, the City of Brighton hired GreenPlay to complete a Parks and Recreation Master Plan in spite of COVID-19 closures. Again, our team shifted all community and stakeholder engagement online, stakeholder interviews and a public forum online through video conferencing software. Our team also developed a project specific website through Bang the Table, which was available in multiple languages. Brighton has a high percentage of Spanish-speaking residents (21%).

Our project website garnered a total of 525 visits, with a maximum of 82 visitors in one day. People clicked

“The findings presentation for this project was conducted in person with City staff, but the meeting was also broadcast over Zoom. According to Dan, an additional 30 people attended virtually, and they were highly engaged in the meeting.”

— Dan Seder, GreenPlay Consultant



through the City of Brighton’s website directly as well as the Brighton Facebook and Linked In pages. As part of the community and stakeholder engagement, we conducted an online survey which received 188 responses.

Respondents indicated a need for greater connectivity, expressing an interest in walking and biking to various locations within the City. The majority of residents indicated a desire to protect environmental resources and preserve agricultural lands. Residents are proud of Brighton’s character and want to maintain it.

Tulsa, Oklahoma – Parks and Recreation Master Plan
Our team is working on a Parks and Recreation Master Plan update for the City of Tulsa, which included digital engagement. Project Manager Dan Seder stated that an advantage to this approach was that the team was able to spread out the public input process over two weeks.

When conducting meetings in person, the process is usually compressed into a couple of days. With the meetings being spread out, our team was able to publicize them more broadly leading to a higher rate of engagement than in-person meetings.

This project also received a lot of participation in the statistically-valid survey. Over 950 responses to the invitation-based survey were received, and an additional 693 people took the survey online through the open link. Again, trails and pathways ranked highly as a priority for residents.

The City of Tulsa took a very active role in the coordination of the engagement sessions and marketing and publicizing the public meetings. The assistance of the city and their active participation with the project team lead to the success of this hybrid approach.

How a Hybrid Approach Can Help Your Community

Now that restrictions are easing and communities are facilities are reopening, many agencies are faced with a decision on how to engage the public. Many of our current clients are using a hybrid approach of virtual and in-person engagement. Virtual engagement lets them reach a different portion of the population who may be pressed for time or childcare, or who don’t want to commute to an in-person meeting.

In person engagement is often more interactive, allowing people to participate without the technological delays and awkwardness that often accompanies virtual meeting software. We have found that offering options for people to engage virtually and in person helps us reach a wider, more representative sample of community residents. Many people who might not have participated before are doing so because it’s easier for them to hop onto a virtual meeting.

As a result, agencies are getting more robust and accurate data they can use to improve their parks and recreation systems. When you are conducting your next parks and recreation master plan, consider the benefits of a combination virtual and in person approach.