

NORTHGATE OUTREACH

**For Seattle Department of
Planning and Development**

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**Process
Summary &
Lessons
Learned**

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In the fall of 2012, the City of Seattle Department of Planning and Development (DPD), in collaboration with Public Health Seattle King County and the Growing Transit Communities project of the Puget Sound Regional Council, launched a focused outreach effort in Seattle's Northgate neighborhood. DPD contracted with a consultant team of Tu Consulting and Judy de Barros to design and facilitate the outreach activities. This document summarizes the approach and model used to carry out the project, and lessons learned from it. It includes three sections:

- Description of the Model, Process & Focus Groups
- Benefits & Outcomes
- Lessons Learned

The report on findings from the project is a separate document, titled "Focus Group Findings" that also has an accompanying Powerpoint presentation titled, "Northgate Targeted Outreach Summary."

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE MODEL, PROCESS & FOCUS GROUPS

The Model. With a goal of gathering new input from stakeholders reflective of the diversity of the Northgate community and who had not participated in previous community wide meetings, the project used a model that included a series of small focus groups, planned and facilitated by diverse community members. There are many reasons why underrepresented groups do not often attend community wide meetings and give input. These include lack of time, lack of information, language and cultural barriers, lack of supportive services such as transportation and childcare, lack of effective outreach, unfamiliarity with public processes, and a belief that their voices may not be heard. Large community meetings with diverse audiences are often dominated by a few speakers with more knowledge and power. In order to hear from each stakeholder group, the project team used a process intended to encourage participants to feel comfortable to participate openly and where everyone could be heard. Because the groups were planned and facilitated by community members, they were held at times and places most convenient for different groups, with relevant supports, and small enough in size that everyone could speak.

Designing the Process. The process was co-designed among project consultants, City of Seattle staff and other agency partners that included Public Health Seattle King County and the Growing Transit Communities Regional Equity Network.

Based on data and previous work by the City of Seattle, the team identified over 15 potential sectors and communities that had not previously been engaged in the Northgate Urban Design planning process. From this group, the team identified potential host organizations and leaders. The consultant team, with help from the City of Seattle and partners, reached out to key contacts to identify those willing to participate. A few organizations were interested but could not participate due to the time frame and busy schedules during the holidays.

Planning meetings were used effectively, and most of consultant time was spent designing the framework and training, conducting outreach and support, and collecting and synthesizing notes.

The full project team (City of Seattle staff, consultants, other agency partners) participated in the orientation for facilitators and provided productive feedback to the consultant team. The consultant team and City of Seattle staff provided support for collecting recorded input and the consultant team synthesized and summarized the input.

Description of Focus Groups. A total of 15 focus groups were held. Each discussion lasted 1 to 2 hours and represented a specific stakeholder group.

- 11 groups were organized and hosted by community organizations representing diverse stakeholder groups including students (high school and college), seniors, residents of subsidized housing, Christian and Muslim faith-based communities, and cultural communities including Eritrean, Somali and American Indian/ Alaska Native.
- 2 groups of apartment residents were organized and hosted by property management teams and facilitated by the consultant team.
- 2 groups were organized and led by the project team because readily available community hosts could not be identified. These stakeholder groups included business and property owners, and employees of Group Health Cooperative.

Community leaders representing diverse organizations each convened, planned and facilitated a group of their stakeholders. Since these leaders knew their communities well, they were able to select times and places most convenient and comfortable for their community members as well as conduct effective outreach to get stakeholders to the meetings. In many cases, they scheduled sessions to precede or follow another gathering such as before Saturday homework tutoring, or after faith services. Since most participants already knew each other and the facilitator, they felt at ease. Groups were also language and culture specific and often held bilingually, which encouraged participation.

An honorarium was offered to organizations as an expression of appreciation for their time and efforts. Group organizers expressed that this was not the main reason for their participation, though in many cases it helped to provide snacks and incentives for the group to attend. Two groups declined the honorarium saying they enjoyed exercising their civic duty.

To ensure consistency in discussion structure and responses across the diverse groups, the project team created a facilitator's discussion outline and basic questions for the focus groups. This was shared with community leaders hosting and facilitating groups in a two hour facilitator's orientation and training that was led by the project team including City of Seattle Staff, consultants and other partners. Most facilitators were able to attend; those that could not attend were emailed the materials and offered a coaching session. In many cases, two leaders from each organization attended. The community facilitators commented that the materials and background about the Northgate Urban Design, the discussion outline and opportunity to practice facilitation skills were all very useful.

Providing a discussion outline and encouraging facilitators to adapt this as needed to best serve their communities allowed the project to provide flexibility to meet the needs of each group while maintaining consistency for the overall project.

The fact that Gordon Clowers, Project Manager from the City of Seattle, attended all but two focus groups was greatly appreciated by all groups. While difficult to schedule, this gave each group a personal contact at the city and a wealth of information about existing neighborhood planning efforts that most were previously unfamiliar with. It gave the City of Seattle an opportunity to hear firsthand from diverse community members and to begin to dialog and build relationship with diverse community groups.

The consultants provided significant phone, email and in person support as needed to the community facilitators in planning and conducting the groups and in compiling notes and responses. While this took more time than expected, it was valuable because it resulted in more and fuller groups, confident facilitators, higher attendance, and comprehensive data.

2. BENEFITS & OUTCOMES

Benefits of the Model (Small focus groups led by diverse community leaders). New input was gathered from 15 diverse stakeholder groups and 152 individuals, most of whom had not previously participated in or given input to public processes.

- Because the groups were small, customized, and in a comfortable setting, participants spoke freely, maximizing the amount and quality of the input received.
- By working with existing organizations with established networks and members, more people were easily reached and existing community leadership and assets were enhanced and supported.
- By offering the honorariums, the project was able to honor people's time and expertise and allow for snacks and other supports at the sessions.
- By having City of Seattle staff at each focus group, the project maximized information sharing as well as relationship building. City staff and consultants were able to support facilitators to probe for more ideas and concerns.
- Because each focus group consisted of participants from the same stakeholder group, many deeply felt concerns were voiced and groups had an opportunity to share community issues as a group as well as give input to the City.
- For many community members, it was their first time participating in a community process. They appreciated the opportunity and were happy to be asked for their opinions and concerns.
- Since the focus groups happened early in the overall planning process for the Northgate Urban Design and Northgate Light Rail Station Design, some of the 152 community members may now be more ready and able to effectively participate in larger community wide planning meetings.

Outcomes

- 152 community participants representing 15 diverse sectors of the community provided valuable input to the Northgate Urban Design Process and the Northgate Light Rail Station Design.
- 152 community participants representing diverse sectors of the community gained information and knowledge about the Northgate Urban Design Framework and process and the Northgate Light Rail Station Planning.

- The range of stakeholder groups engaged in the Northgate planning process was broadened.
- Relationships were built between City of Seattle and several underrepresented groups.
- 152 individuals from several underrepresented groups increased capacity and interest in civic engagement.

3. LESSONS LEARNED

Timeframe. The process took longer than expected.

- Community groups are very busy, and scheduling over the holidays and year end proved difficult.
- The logistics of coordinating multiple groups led by different facilitators and getting notes turned in took more time than expected. Multiple calls and email reminders were needed to ensure groups were scheduled, coordinate with the City of Seattle staff, and ensure the notes were compiled. Everyone was very patient and the community groups were grateful for ongoing reminders.
- Relationship building/ trust building and outreach also took significant time. Where time permitted, early face to face meetings helped with communication and to support full understanding of the process, especially for the non-English speaking groups. This process could not be entirely done by email but required some phone and face to face meetings.
- The flexibility of the City of Seattle to extend the timeline was invaluable.

Balance of structure and flexibility with strong support. The balance of providing a structured framework and training with flexibility to adapt for individual groups was helpful.

- The community facilitators found the orientation session/ training and coaching extremely helpful. They learned needed information about the Northgate Urban Design Framework and Light Rail Planning, gained skills and confidence to facilitate sessions, were able to review the logistics of the focus groups, and met other community leaders.
- Community facilitators found the written guide very useful as a “script” and a format to collect notes. Many mentioned that in some places the guide was repetitive. However, they felt confident in adapting it to the needs of their group and skipping or grouping questions where it made sense.
- Facilitators found it helpful to have a separate person taking notes.

Meeting groups where they are. The project adjusted to meet the needs of each group.

- Originally, the planning team considered holding multi faith and multi ethnic focus groups, in an effort to build relationships across groups. However, community groups gave clear feedback that their community members would feel more comfortable to speak freely and be more likely to come if they were with their own community members. As a result, the project increased the number of groups to be organized and supported.
- Some groups were more experienced with civic engagement than others. Those less experienced needed more support. The consultants were able to customize support as needed for each group. This was important, as not one size fits all. For some groups, it was the first time any community members had participated in this kind of public process. Another group had had a bad previous experience and had not felt their input was heard. Each group needed customized support.

- Two groups elected to hold their focus groups without City of Seattle staff or consultants present as they felt community members would speak more freely. The project team respected this decision and included the input from these groups in the reports.

Community leadership and ownership is strong and should be supported.

- Across the board, the community facilitators did an excellent job in convening and hosting groups, ensuring both community members and City of Seattle staff felt safe and comfortable, facilitating the discussion and taking notes, encouraging community members to raise difficult issues, and empowering community members to share their voices.
- Due to the strong leadership and engagement of community leaders, there was high community ownership of the project. Some community facilitators were nervous, and others skeptical, but in the end, they were happy to have participated, thankful for the opportunity and proud of their community members for sharing insights.
- The project could not have gathered input from so many diverse community members without the partnership of community organizations and leaders.

Engaged and open participation from City of Seattle staff, Gordon Clowers.

- Most groups felt that Gordon’s participation and openness was very helpful. He brought maps and gave solid explanations of the planning process to each group. He also listened carefully and asked questions to clarify what the participants meant. He was respectful and helpful to the process.

Strong partnerships leverage broad resources and result in good information gathered/

- All partners and community leaders were dedicated to learning from each other and the community and in delivering solid input to the process.
- The City of Seattle was able to leverage support for this project by creating a strong and diverse partnership between institutional partners Public Health Seattle King County and Growing Transit Communities, the consultant team, and the diverse community-led stakeholder groups. The ownership of the project was broad, the learnings shared among all, and each group was able to contribute what they do best. This resulted in deeper results and learnings.

Below are several quotes from community facilitators.

- *“Thank you for the opportunity!”*
- *“They all seemed open to share their views about Northgate area. They were content to attend the meeting and at the beginning were ready to argue their points until they were informed there is no wrong answer. Thank you so much for this opportunity to provide input to City of Seattle.”*
- *“At the end, one gentleman came up and volunteered that this was a very informative meeting. This was significant, as they don’t attend many non-religious meetings.”*
- *“Very free flowing, participants enjoyed themselves, everyone got to speak and that was good. Active conversation with very creative ideas. Thank you for the opportunity to share our input.”*
- *“It was great, all participated. Just doing our civic duty.”*