

City of Traverse City Public Participation Strategy

Updated 2026



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Community



Strategy Purpose and Goals

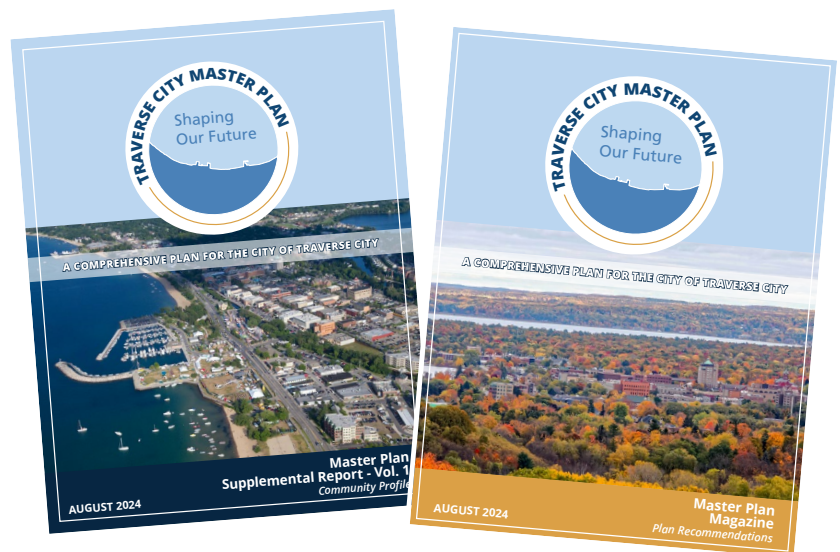
The purpose for establishing this Public Participation Strategy is to have a clear set of policies, procedures, and methods to apply across a wide range of City initiatives to ensure the public has appropriate venues and timing for feedback. This is meant to be a “living document” that is updated periodically to respond to changes in staffing, noticing, and community needs.

The following goals provide the framework for this strategy’s intent:

- Ensure transparency and a clear planning and development process
- Conduct effective and engaging planning processes (through planning and zoning projects)
- Encourage developers to engage impacted stakeholders at various stages of the development process
- Anticipate the need for engagement and proactively seek timely input
- Provide educational and informative opportunities
- Disseminate results
- Continually improve methods and track success
- Reach a broad constituency, diverse stakeholders, employing different techniques and approaches for different groups
- Utilize an effective communication plan to convey City updates

The City will review the effectiveness of the specific public participation activities listed in this strategy and will adjust them accordingly in order to maximize their success. Staff will also explore ways to improve communication strategies to reach the specific project stakeholders and gather community feedback and consider new methods of communication and engagement as they become available, and update this strategy as needed.

The public participation actions described throughout this strategy do not preclude additional public involvement or engagement efforts. In circumstances when the City consults with a third party entity, that entity shall adhere to the provisions of this strategy, if applicable.



State Regulations

State of Michigan legislation details the minimum requirements for public participation. Traverse City abides by this legislation and strives to go above and beyond the traditional practices to be proactive in solicitation of public input for all projects. Following are the laws regarding public input as set by the State.

Michigan Open Meetings Act (PA 267 of 1976)

- The City sets the schedule for meetings in advance of the new calendar year.
- The public will be notified within 10 days of the first meeting of a public body in each calendar or fiscal year; the body will publicly post a list stating the dates, times, and places of all its regular meetings at its principal office.
- Traverse City will hold meetings in buildings which are accessible to the general public.
- If there is a change in schedule, within three days of the meeting in which the change is made, the public body will post a notice stating the new dates, times, and places of regular meetings.
- For special and irregular meetings, public bodies will post a notice indicating the date, time, and place at least 18 hours before the meetings.
- A regular meeting of a public body which is recessed for more than 36 hours can only be reconvened if a notice is posted 18 hours in advance
- Public bodies will hold emergency sessions without a written notice or time constraints if the public health, safety, or welfare is severely threatened and if two-thirds of the body's members vote to hold the emergency meeting.
- Any citizen can request that public bodies put them on a mailing list so that they are notified in advance of all meetings by contacting the City Clerk's office, 231-922-4480.



Michigan Planning Enabling Act (PA 33 of 2008)

For public hearings required by the Michigan Planning Enabling Act for Master Plans: Notification of Intent to Proceed: The following parties will be notified via first class mail, personal delivery, or email by the planning commission of the intent to plan and request the recipient's cooperation and comment:

- Leelanau County Planning Department
- Networks Northwest
- Grand Traverse County Road Commission
- Bay Area Transportation Authority
- MDOT
- Elmwood, Garfield, East Bay and Peninsula Townships
- Traverse City Light and Power
- Consumers Energy
- DTE Energy
- Cherry Capital Airport
- TC Downtown Development Authority
- All Organized Traverse City Neighborhood Associations
- Traverse City Area Public Schools

- After the draft master plan has been submitted to the City Commission for review and approval for distribution, the draft plan will be submitted to the above entities for review.
- Before approving a proposed master plan, the Planning Commission will hold a public hearing on the proposed master plan. The hearing will be held after the expiration of the deadline for comment as outlined in the act (42 days for an amendment, 63 days for a new master plan).
- The Planning Commission will give notice of the time and place of the public hearing not less than 15 days before the hearing by publication in in the local Record-Eagle newspaper. The Planning Commission will also submit notice of the public hearing by first class mail, personal delivery, or email to the list of recipients listed above.

Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (PA 220 of 2006)

For public hearings required by the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act and as described in the zoning ordinance:

- Distribution of notice
 - Publish notice in the Record-Eagle not less than 15 days before the date of the hearing.
 - Notice given to all persons whom real property is assessed within 300' of the property that is the subject of the request and to the occupants of all structures within 300' of the subject property
- Notice requirements
 - Notice shall describe the nature of the request
 - Indicate the property that is the subject of the request
 - Listing of street addresses
 - Time and location when the request will be considered
 - Time and location where comments will be received concerning the request
- Actions requiring notice:
 - **Zoning Ordinance Text and Map Amendments**
 - Planning commission shall hold at least 1 public hearing prior to submitting recommendations to the City Commission for proposed zoning ordinance/ map amendment.
 - The City Commission may hold a public hearing.
 - Rezoning for 11+ adjacent properties do not require 300' notice to neighboring properties.
 - Notice of time place of hearing shall also be given by mail to each electric, gas, pipeline public utility company, telecommunication service provider, railroad operating in the district affected, and airport manager, that has registered its name and address with the city to be contacted for public hearings. company, telecommunication service provider, railroad operating in the district affected, and airport manager, that has registered its name and address with the city to be contacted for public hearing.
 - **Special land uses decided by the City Commission:**
 - Public hearings shall be held at the Planning Commission and City Commission.
 - **Special land uses decided by the Planning Director**
 - A public notice in the Record Eagle will be published at least 15 days in advance of a decision on the special use.
 - The applicant or the Planning Director may request a public hearing.
 - **Planned Unit Development:**
 - The City Planning Commission may hold a public hearing. The City Commission shall hold at least 1 public hearing on the request.



Key Stakeholders

Each project's stakeholders will be dependent on the scope and scale of the process. Each project will include an evaluation to ensure the appropriate stakeholders are targeted. The following list includes a variety of typical stakeholders:

- Neighborhood organizations
- Disability Network
- Traverse City Housing Commission
- Networks Northwest
- MDOT and EGLE
- County Road Commission
- Munson Medical Center
- Traverse Connect
- Northwestern Michigan College
- TCAPS and Northwest Education Services
- DDA
- Brownfield Authority
- Aspire North
- Grand Traverse County
- Bay Area Transportation Authority
- TART Trails
- The Watershed Center
- Other stakeholders identified by the stakeholders listed above



Different types of stakeholders will need different levels of engagement that should be identified with the following categories:

Affected

- Audiences you most frequently communicate with, consult, involve or collaborate with during the process
- Examples: Affected residents and property owners, decision-making body

Impacted

- Audiences surrounding the project area whom you will consult or involve
- Examples: Neighboring residents or property owners, neighborhood associations, business groups, utilities, government officials with jurisdiction like road and drain commissions

Interested

- Audiences interested in the project but not necessarily directly affected or impacted, whom you will inform or consult
- Examples: Anyone expressing interest, advocacy groups, schools and other taxing entities, elected officials, adjacent municipalities

Aware

- Audiences you want to keep informed about the project
- Examples: Media (print, radio, television, internet), social media groups.



Communication Toolbox

The City will utilize the following table to guide decisions on which approaches are most appropriate:

Table: Toolbox Goals by Type

Inform: Educate	
notifications	Provide the public balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions.
outdoor signs	
neighborhood meetings	
public meetings	
website	
press releases	
social media	
Consult: Listen	
social media	Obtain feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions. Listen and acknowledge concerns and aspirations and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
surveys	
interviews	
public hearings	
Involve: Two-way Communication	
public workshops	Work with public to ensure concerns and aspirations are understood and considered and directly reflected in alternatives. Provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
focus groups	
town hall (ongoing)	
Collaborate: partner	
charrettes	Partner with public in development and evaluation of alternatives and selection of preferred solution. Incorporate recommendations into decisions to the maximum extent possible.
committees	
citizen advisory groups	
Empower: Delegate	
ballot measures	City implements what public decides.

Worksheet: Level of Public Involvement Needed

This worksheet will help to determine the appropriate level of community engagement. The level of engagement should be appropriate to the level of community interest, potential controversy and project complexity.

Check a single column for each question as it pertains to the project or issue at hand.

Questions	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
What is the expected level of conflict or controversy?					
How significant are the potential impacts to the community?					
What degree of involvement does the public seem to want?					
What is the potential for community engagement to impact the final decision or project?					
How great are the possible benefits of engaging the public?					
How great are the risks of NOT involving the public?					
What level of public participation is desired or expected by the final decisionmakers?					
What are the chances that the media are or will become interested?					
How complex is the project?					



Toolbox Best Practices

Inform

- Notifications:
 - Public notifications per the MPEA and MZEA as identified above are posted at the Governmental Center, on the City's website and Record Eagle
 - For special meetings related to a project or process, additional notifications include press releases to the media, social media postings, signs distributed to local businesses, email blasts to neighborhood groups and list serves
 - For engineering projects, include a notice of schedule, door hanger with dates of impact updates, and keep impacted businesses and residents informed throughout the process
 - Ensure a consistent, friendly tone across departments, with messaging centralized from the Clerk's office
 - Announcements during the Commission and Board meetings
 - Newsletters, e-newsletters,
 - Attachments to utility bills
 - Educate: find an opportunity to educate on each distribution:
 - "Why are we removing trees?"
 - "Here's a link for more information"
 - "Why are we doing this project?"
- Public Meetings/Educational Sessions:
 - Presentations to neighborhood organizations or those affected by a project
 - Inform about process, what to expect
 - Prepare FAQ and update following meeting
 - Open house drop in sessions to learn
- Website:
 - Broaden "City News" portion of website by adding a "Notices" section for what is also shown on social media (e.g. "emergency road closure")
 - Utilize the City's homepage as a primary location for official city statements
 - Consider adding a rumors and trending topics page to provide FAQ on controversial topics
 - Add "projects at a glance" page to summarize updates on projects across departments to answer "What's the latest with this project?"
 - Individual webpages will be created for significant projects; these webpages will include related information and documents about the proposed projects

- Messaging/press release:
 - Continue to streamline messaging to be consistent in terms of tone and centralized coming from the City Clerk's office
 - Develop a communication strategy for the Clerk's office to handle all public communication
 - Press releases are typically distributed to a media list containing local or statewide print and broadcast organizations
- Social media management:
 - Encouraged to be informative rather than conversational to keep the opinions of officials the "voice" of the city and limit the responses required by a social media manager
 - Meeting notices
 - Construction or progress updates
 - Event notifications

Consult

- Surveys
 - Surveys are especially useful to evaluate existing conditions (for parks and recreation plans or market studies, for instance) or gauge the importance of a recommendation or alternative (i.e. do you strongly agree or disagree with the following?)
 - Surveys are not recommended to be used as a substitute for a vote since statistically significant surveys require in depth implementation to ensure a sufficient sample size but rather to "take the pulse" of the public
- One-on-one interviews
 - Generally more confidential in nature between staff or consultants with key players in relation to a plan or project to glean future plans or projects and an assessment of current conditions for future recommendations
- Public hearings
 - Used primarily as a tool at the end of a project or process to gain the public's opinion on an initiative
 - Ensure public has able opportunity to understand the subject prior to the hearing
 - Typically held as part of a City Commission or other public meeting at the Governmental Center
 - Noticing per planning and zoning enabling legislation
 - Limit comments to a specific amount of time (being respectful of everyone's time)



Involve

- Public workshops
 - Interactive meetings open to the public to not only educate on a particular topic or plan but gain input through hands on exercises, conversations, and activities
 - Easily accessible locations with sufficient parking and transit access
- Focus groups
 - Facilitated small group meetings to vet ideas, react to alternatives, and provide specific input
 - Variety of members may be solicited to attend from affected neighborhood associations, community members, DDA, business leaders, students, board and commission members, developers or other important stakeholders
 - May take the form of a sit down meeting or walking tour
- Town hall meeting
 - A way to meet the need for more two-way communication that is not possible at public hearings.
 - Foster informal conversations between officials and constituents
 - Entertain questions on general topics or specific projects

Collaborate

- Charrettes
 - Multi-day design workshops
 - Consultant-led, reserved for bigger, public projects that require significant public involvement with a design focus
 - Encouraged for private development with significant impact on the urban form and public realm
- Committees
 - Either in the framework of an overall planning process or a separate committee formed to study an issue at the request of an elected/appointed body
 - Typically meet on a regular basis throughout the course of the project
 - Commission/Board formed committees will have meetings posted with opportunity for public comment.

Strategies for Outreach

Public Projects

- City Planning projects:
 - The scale and extent of the project require different levels of engagement
 - Anticipate upcoming projects and seek a balance that will maximize input while avoiding “meeting fatigue” by the public
 - Demonstrate successes, recent accomplishments, and implementation to focus message on how results will be used
 - Summarize other concurrent planning projects and how each relates to one another
 - **General goal for each phase of project:**
 - Beginning: Informational
 - Middle: Vet Alternatives
 - End: Consensus Building
 - Final: Public hearing, per enabling act
- Public/Infrastructure Projects:
 - Initial informative meeting
 - Door hanger notices closer to project initiation
 - Continue to communicate during construction
 - Update businesses and residents on access during construction, individually or with signage
 - Notify how to get questions answered on status or response to complaints

For large, private development projects:

Purpose: To ensure that applicants seeking approval of certain types of projects pursue early and effective public participation in conjunction with their proposed developments, giving citizens an early opportunity to learn about, understand and comment upon proposals, and to provide an opportunity for citizens to be involved in the development of their community. This will in turn minimize hearing concerns for the first time at a public hearing and provide the applicant a feedback loop to minimize re-submitting plans numerous times late in the review process.

- Defined as a project with 80 or more residential units; a project over 60 feet in height; a project containing more than 50,000 sq. feet of non-residential, usable floor area, or other projects determined by the Planning Director
- Project initiation:
 - Meet with staff and development review committee
- Provide documentation of public participation methods and feedback along with site plan submittal
- Conduct a project briefing prior to public hearing to address concerns in conversation with public



Communicating Results

As important as collecting feedback is, even more important is compiling it into a usable format to be used in the decision-making process so participants are aware of how their input is used. Certain forms of engagement such as focus groups or interviews are likely to have some level of confidentiality and summaries of key takeaways by facilitators are suitable to share results.

Table: How to Communicate Results

Inform - Educate	
educational sessions	document attendance and topics covered
public meetings	TV, post meeting minutes online, videos of recent meetings
Consult - Listen	
social media	respond to inquiries as appropriate
surveys	online summary, newsletter
interviews	confidential, takeaways may be summarized
public hearings	TV, post minutes and videos online
Involve - twoway communication	
public workshops	results on website; online survey for follow up feedback when possible
focus groups	generally confidential, takeaways may be summarized
town hall	post minutes online describe how the public input influenced the decision
Collaborate - partner	
charrettes	post notes online, host wrap up meeting showcasing preferred alternative and next steps
committees	takeaways summarized

Evaluating Effectiveness of Efforts

In order to track the success of various outreach methods, the following tools are recommended to document successes and lessons learned for future events:

- City Reports
 - Summarize the major activities and accomplishments from each City Department
 - Public engagement efforts & reach are included in the City's annual report, The Performance
 - List the year's public engagement successes and lessons learned and include upcoming projects likely to require significant public involvement
 - Continue annual goal setting session with the Planning Commission
- Event Feedback Form
 - Utilize existing online form to gather feedback on effectiveness of public participation
 - Create business cards with link to have at meetings to direct participants to website
- Internal Evaluation Form
 - Create an internal public participation evaluation form for staff or consultants to summarize each event's planning, successes, and lessons learned



Future Initiatives

The following are suggestions for future initiatives that the City can use to evaluate further needs to enhance public participation. Should the resources or opportunities arise in the future, these would be useful components to maximize the effectiveness of public participation.

- **Town Hall Meetings:**
 - Need for more two-way communication that is not possible at typical public hearings.
 - Start with an annual Town Hall with the entire council as an informal open forum on private and public development projects in the city.
 - Additionally, one or two city commissioners could conduct an informal open forum on a semi-regular basis; coffee shops, drop-in sessions, listening sessions.
 - Officials are suggested to attend more neighborhood meetings too to keep the line of communication open between their constituents.
- **Communication Training:**
 - City Clerk's office to initiate media training for officials and staff:
 - How to be interviewed
 - Body language basics
 - How to act on camera
 - Communication training for neighborhood organizations:
 - How to facilitate neighborhood meetings and consensus-building
 - How to navigate the municipal participation process
 - Etiquette and effective communication with officials and staff
- **Revamp notices from the City to be more consistent, positive, and less "notice-y" and more informative.**

Completed & On-going Initiatives

The following were suggested in a previous version of the Public Participation Guide, and have been undertaken—either in whole or in part—by the City.

- **Citizen Academy:**
 - City Academy began in 2023. Annually, one class of 10-15 citizens completes a 5-week, 8-session “academy”, covering a wide range of topics including City infrastructure, project planning, parking, zoning, parks, the annual budget, and more.
- **Public Ombudsman/Communications Director staff position:**
 - The Director of Communications and Strategic Initiaves is in the City Manager’s office
 - External messaging has been streamlined, and generally comes from one place, with a more consistent tone.
 - This position also sends out a weekly e-newsletter, The Bay Brief, which regularly informs the public of projects, upcoming meetings, voting information, street closures, and more.
- **Neighborhood Association President’s Council:**
 - In the last 5 years, the number of neighborhood associations has increased, which put strain on staff to attend association meetings. In 2025, the City Manager’s office created a “Presidents Council”, in which neighborhood association presidents or top representatives meet quarterly with City leadership to learn about projects and initiatives, and have open conversations about neighborhood concerns.

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