





Lessons from the Field on Vacant Lot Greening

Resident Engagement

Resident engagement was the number one, most widely endorsed practice contributing to organizational success in maintaining and greening vacant lots. Resident engagement can build a foundation of trusting relationships, increase community buy-in, support development of responsive programs, and help organizations accomplish more and sustain their work.

Organizations are using a range of activities to engage residents, from communicating on social media to involving residents in leadership and decision-making roles. Engaging in multiple resident engagement activities can increase opportunities to connect with residents and ensure the work is responsive and equitable. While all forms of engaging residents can be beneficial, survey responses showed that organizations that involve residents in their work and in leadership roles see expanding benefits, including enhanced organizational functioning.



	 COMMUNICATION	 INPUT	 INVOLVEMENT	 LEADERSHIP
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletters • Annual reports • Website and social media • Flyers • Door knocking • Speaking at local meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys • Focus groups • Town hall meetings • Hosting listening events • Speaking with community-based organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighborhood greening events • Technical support • Hosting neighborhood trainings • Supplying tools and resources to residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory planning • Employment at organization • Lot leasing to neighbors • Resident oversight boards
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase transparency • Build trusting relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify resident priorities • Create responsive programming • Increase buy-in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build and leverage local capacity • Sustain investment long-term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local ownership of projects • Long-term community buy-in

Foundational Practices: Be intentional about engagement, respond to resident needs, further resident priorities

Why Resident Engagement Matters

1. Identifies Residents' Needs

Gathering resident input early in the planning stages helps organizations identify resident needs and prioritize development of programs and services that are more responsive.

"The advantages are that you end up with true, genuine community input. We had no idea they were going to say they wanted a skateboard park. And so you can actually meet those needs when it might be something that you hadn't thought about before."

2. Increases Community Buy-in

Engaging residents early and often in the planning process increases community buy-in for proposed initiatives.

"We listen first, and then act on a project. Although there is never universal consensus on a city project, this helps ensure buy-in from the bottom up."

"Plan early and often. Our annual plan was produced with input from a community advisory group, which helped get buy-in from stakeholders early on the process."

3. Demonstrates Respect

Understanding and honoring residents' wishes helps organizations demonstrate fundamental respect for the communities they serve.

"It's a respect thing that we need to make sure that residents know that their opinion is what matters to us. If they don't want it to be stabilized, if they want it to be left alone, then we'll leave it alone."

"We go to the community team members and ask them what would you like to have done? If you don't do that it's just like going into somebody's house and going straight to the refrigerator without asking."

4. Accomplishes More

Supporting resident-engaged maintenance and greening with tools, supplies, and labor helps organizations accomplish more and better sustain their work.

"We make it clear to residents that if they can provide the volunteer labor to do this critical work of maintaining vacant land, the city and county will provide the dumpsters and put the necessary tools in the hands of residents. This process allows residents to take ownership of spaces in their communities."

5. Establishes Long-Term Success

Furthering resident priorities and leadership in greening work results in projects that are more relevant, accepted, and sustained in communities.

"I really feel if our program disappeared tomorrow that the lots would still look better than they did before we started the program... it wouldn't go back to where it was before because people just wouldn't allow that."



Practitioner Insights

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Invest in Resident Engagement

Intentionally dedicate time to communicating with and building understanding with residents, while focusing on providing exceptional customer service.

"Make the community engagement part meaningful, intentional..."

"Spend as much—if not more—time working with the people you are serving and building understanding as you do carrying-out investments and real estate projects."



Communication



Connect with the Community

Stay close to residents through regular communication and establishing a presence at community events and activities. This helps organizations develop relationships with residents and keep a pulse on community needs and priorities.

"Constant connection with the community in their own settings—meet people where they are. Use that intel to develop and update approaches."

Be Honest and Transparent

Have honest conversations upfront and be sure to manage expectations about goals, activities, feasibility, and budget.

"[My] team prides themselves on how they engage with the community and have open, honest, and direct discussions. It is tough to engage openly. It can be a difficult position to be in, to be the largest property owner in the city, with a huge responsibility. But that's the approach we take."

"When people see you working, have key talking points ready about what's going on with the lot and ways they can get involved."

Input



Engage Neighbors Early and Often

Engage adjacent neighbors to solicit their input about projects early in the planning process. This helps to ensure projects are positively received and used by the community.

"Ask the neighbors how they want to use the lot."

"Always make sure the surrounding neighborhoods are involved from the beginning of the project, even if it isn't a neighborhood-driven restoration project."

Respond to Resident Needs and Priorities

Provide services and programs that are directly responsive to resident needs and concerns, even when it does not further your immediate goals.

"Act as a resource for community members in whatever capacity is needed. This may include developing group structure and process, mitigating conflict, being a listening ear, or connecting neighborhood groups to other people and agencies that provide support."

"Residents go home to the neighborhood every day and should be the primary point of reference for building a vision for the neighborhood."

Involvement



Make it Easy to Participate

Organize clean-ups at convenient times, incentivize participation, and offer high- and low-tech methods to get involved.

"We pair user friendly technology like iPads and anonymous [survey] links with more traditional approaches like attending block clubs and neighborhood associations to meet residents and build relationships face-to-face."

Be Consistent

Be consistent and follow-through with your commitments. This affirms your trustworthiness and inspires residents to get involved.

"The more you stay up on it and show that you are a pivotal partnership within the community, people will start believing and start being more active within the cleaning up and stabilization of their own neighborhoods."

Inspire Participation through Shared Vision

Help residents understand how their work contributes to the big picture. Citywide master plans and land use plans are helpful tools for highlighting how smaller-scale projects advance the collective mission.

"It is critical to make residents aware that they are a part of achieving a larger vision for the city. Residents should know that their individual efforts and work are connected with broader community-level efforts made up of residents working across the city to beautify and eliminate blight."

Leadership

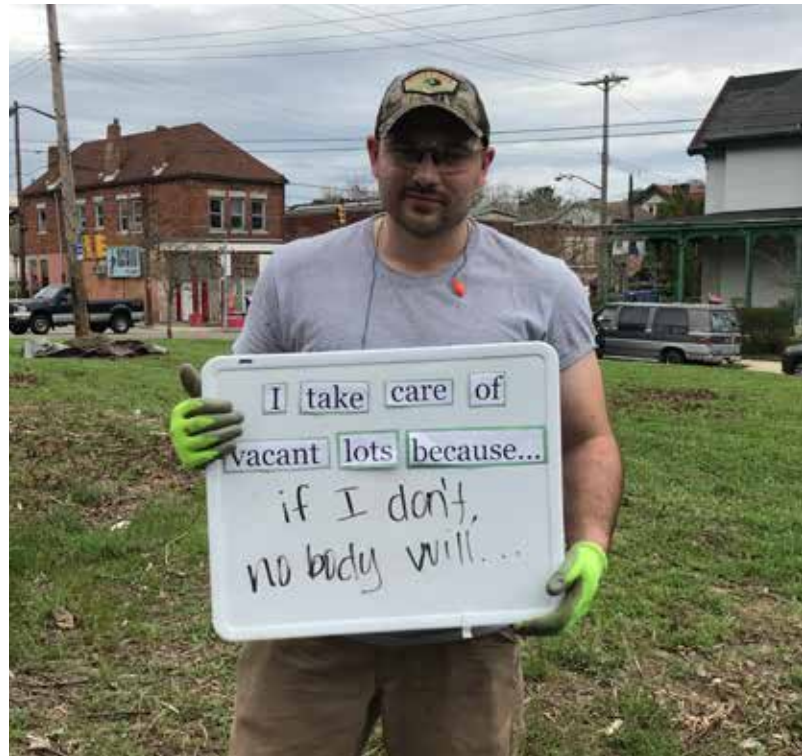


Elevate the Role of Residents

Place residents in staff and leadership roles to further project success, community ownership, and long-term sustainability.

"When engaging with community, it helps to have staff who are not only knowledgeable about the community but also representative of the community and able to identify with the lived experiences of community members."

"Make sure to follow the lead of neighbors - if they don't feel it's a priority, then it probably won't be sustainable."



The Keys to Success guides are companion products to *America's Vacant Lot Landscape: Insights from the National Survey on Greening*, which can be found at www.communityprogress.org/vacantland.

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