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The recent update to the AICP Code of Ethics calls for planners to change the way that we do business by performing our work in a manner that addresses social justice and focuses on making equitable decisions for the good of all that we serve.

Inclusive Public Engagement — Putting the Code into Practice

by Debbie Alaimo Lawlor, FAICP, PP

By human nature, planners are generally civic-minded individuals that seek to make our communities great places to live and work. However, for decades there have been aspects of our work related to planning and zoning that have not served all of our constituencies equally and in many cases have negatively impacted underrepresented groups, whether intentionally or inadvertently.

While the [AICP Code of Ethics](#) has always aimed to guide and inspire planners to make ethical decisions, it has not specifically drawn attention to historic inequities resulting from our work, nor has it focused on ways that planners may be the change agents to eliminate bias from our recommendations and ultimately the decisions of those that employ us.

The recent update to the AICP Code of Ethics (effective January 1, 2022) calls for planners to change the way that we do business by performing our work in a manner that addresses social justice and focuses on making equitable decisions for the good of all that we serve.

The *Aspirational Goals* of the Code of Ethics (Section A) highlight several areas where planners can better serve the public interest by seeking a greater degree of equity and inclusion, including:

- Examine our own cultures, practices, values, and professional positions in an effort to reveal and understand our conscious and unconscious biases and privileges as an essential first step so we can better serve a truly inclusive public interest promoting a sense of belonging.
- Develop skills that enable better communication and more effective, respectful, and compassionate planning efforts with all communities, especially underrepresented communities and marginalized people, so that they may fully participate in planning. Respect the experience, knowledge, and history of all people.
- Incorporate equity principles and strategies as the foundation for preparing plans and implementation programs to achieve more socially just decision-making. Implement, for existing plans, regulations,

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Inclusive Public Engagement, cont'd

policies and procedures, changes which can help overcome historical impediments to racial and social equity.

- Facilitate the exchange of ideas and ensure that people have the opportunity for meaningful, timely, and informed participation in the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence, especially underrepresented communities and marginalized people. Attention and resources should be given to issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion and should reflect the diversity of the community.

Furthermore, the *Rules of Conduct* (Section B) of the Code of Ethics includes rules that all certified planners shall adhere to. A new rule has been added to specifically address acts of discrimination and harassment that states, "We shall not commit or ignore an act of discrimination or harassment."

The importance of this rule is not only to ensure that planners don't commit a wrongful act of discrimination or harassment, but also to guide planners to elevate any issues of discrimination or harassment that they may perceive in their work in an effort to eliminate them from the decision-making process.

Please take some time to review the [AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct](#) and learn the context behind many of the important changes.

Inclusiveness in the Public Engagement Process

A key role that planners can play in putting new elements of the AICP Code of Ethics into practice is to broaden the scope and goals for public engagement to include more diverse and inclusive participation throughout the process.

Presenting a project at a meeting is a means of providing public information; it is not public engagement. Accepting public comment on a project is a way for the public to provide their input related to

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The Aspirational Goals of the Code of Ethics highlight several areas where planners can better serve the public interest by seeking a greater degree of equity and inclusion

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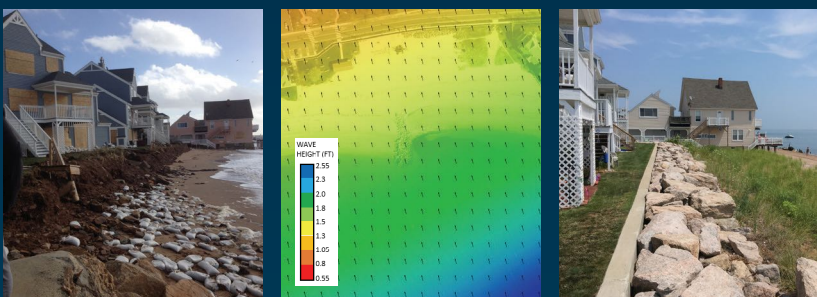
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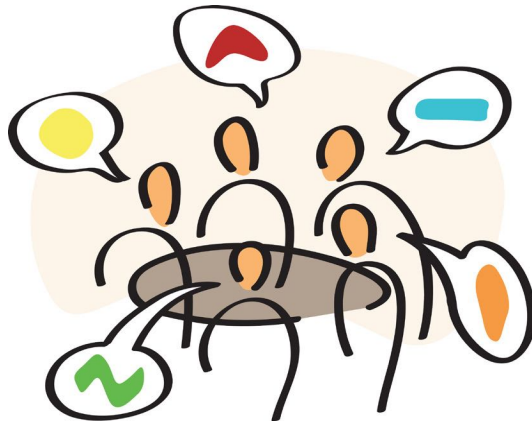
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Public engagement is one of the greatest parts of any democratic process.



Inclusive Public Engagement, cont'd

their views and/or desired modifications with the intention of seeking a better outcome for the community — that is one means of engagement and oftentimes the only type that is used to gain public input. The problem is that while public notice may be provided in accordance with the law, it is not far-reaching enough to be acknowledged as a solicitation for public input and engage the potentially impacted audience. Sometimes, to achieve extensive

public engagement, the planner needs to go above and beyond to reach a large, diverse audience that will provide meaningful input.

Public engagement is one of the greatest parts of any democratic process — it can be focused on a single topic/location (a zoning change or development project) or broader-based (a comprehensive master plan) — but should never be discriminatory or limit participation of those who may be affected by the outcome of recommendations or decisions related to a plan, program, or process. It should be designed to solicit the greatest amount of participation and input from a diversity of constituents that are representative of the affected community.

The best public engagement occurs early on in a process where information gathered from the public can play a meaningful part in the decision-making process. Additionally, a multifaceted public engagement program is more inclusive and helps to achieve broader input. There are a number of methods to gather public input and by combining several of these



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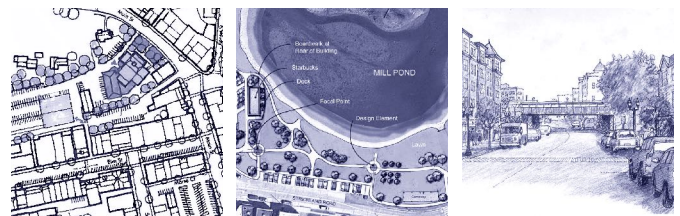
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Inclusive Public Engagement, cont'd

you can reach a range of constituents with diversity of age, race, ethnicity, identity, geographic location, etc. You can reach the public at a meeting location or out in the neighborhood (on their own turf), at a scheduled time or on their own time, and using technology or not. Engagement should seek to attract participants with varying knowledge of the location, project components, historic data and more.

A multifaceted public engagement program may include any of the following:

- Charrettes/Public Workshops
- One-on-One Stakeholder Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Tactical Urbanism, Pop-Ups, Walking Tours
- Brochures
- Surveys
- ESRI Story Maps

The most important part of facilitating a public engagement process is to keep it simple, understandable, experiential, inclusive, and transparent. The planner has a responsibility to ensure that information presented is understandable and accurate. Provide notice in several places where the general public will see it, not just in a public notice column of a newspaper, but on a municipal calendar of events and postings at public locations like schools, ballfields, coffee shops, and supermarkets. Do not use uncommon jargon or acronyms. Do use visuals — images, graphics, maps. Don't talk at the audience, but rather talk with the audience — you want to hear what they have to say as much as to provide them with sufficient background information. Let the public know that their input and opinions count by informing them how their comments will be incorporated into the process moving forward and provide them with next steps whenever possible.

While there is no guarantee that all viewpoints can be addressed, an inclusive process ensures that all voices are heard and considered as part of the decision-making process. Including the public in the planning process from the start leads to more productive dialogue and better plans. ■



Emeline Harrigan

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Don't talk at the audience, but rather talk with the audience.



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