Memorandum

TO: City-County Planning Board Members
FROM: Kelly Bennett, AICP
DATE: February 25, 2021
SUBJECT: Virtual Outreach – Best Practices and Recommendations

Due to safety concerns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, Planning and Development Services (PDS) staff has been relying on virtual outreach methods to communicate and meet with the public since March 2020. Virtual outreach refers to the methods to reach out to, meet with, and gather input from the public through online platforms.

In response to this shift to a largely virtual method of departmental outreach, the Planning Board directed staff to research best practices and propose recommendations for virtual outreach as part of its 2020-21 work program. Specifically, this report will explore best practices for virtual outreach and online meetings, how PDS and other City departments have approached citizen outreach during the pandemic, and make recommendations for how PDS staff should handle virtual outreach during the pandemic and afterward.

Virtual outreach was not a new concept that arrived suddenly in March 2020. City staff had years of experience communicating through social media platforms, collecting input through online surveys, and creating videos to help convey planning concepts to the public. PDS staff even won the National Planning Achievement Award in Public Outreach in 2013 from the American Planning Association for its outreach work on the *Legacy 2030* comprehensive plan, which used a blog platform to gather public input.

What *has* been new to PDS staff has been holding board/commission meetings and other citizen input meetings nearly exclusively online through Zoom and similar software, as well as using online software for current planning needs. Staff has discovered that holding online meetings has actually created some opportunities, including:
- More citizens can participate as barriers to time and place are removed;
- Staff can better include stakeholders who feel intimidated by in-person meetings; and
- We can share results of surveys and questions instantaneously during meetings.

However, staff has also found that some of the more complicated meetings it hosts for longer-range planning, such as corridor and interchange plans and the public art plan, have needed to be delayed in order to get more citizens involved. The main problems with relying on virtual outreach are associated with the digital divide between citizens with ready access to computers and the internet and those who do not.

However, Ed McNeal, the City's Director of Marketing and Communications, says that the digital divide might not be as wide as we fear. He points to the preponderance of smart phones, owned by nearly everyone, even those without housing, as well as City and County facilities with broadband internet access and computer work stations, such as recreation centers and libraries. In addition to the digital divide, there are many people who are just not as comfortable communicating via the computer as they are with in-person meetings.

As we begin a County-wide comprehensive plan update process and attempt to move forward with several other long-range plans, we should examine how best to handle virtual outreach and online meetings in order to meet these new demands and include as many citizens in our processes as possible.

Best practices

As planners and citizens the world over have had to adapt to virtual outreach and participation, best practices have quickly emerged. PDS staff researched several planning organizations (such as the American Planning Association) and spoke to City Marketing and Communications staff to compile a list of best practices that attempt to capitalize on the benefits of virtual outreach and solve the digital divide problems the medium presents. The main areas discussed in this report are virtual outreach and online meetings, both live and recorded.

Virtual outreach

Virtual outreach does not necessarily mean reaching out to citizens exclusively over the internet. It means reaching people where they are, by a variety of means, both digital and traditional. A compilation of best practices from City Marketing and Communications, planning organizations, and consultants includes the following:

- Use familiar channels to let people know about the opportunity for public comment, such as City and County websites and social media. Directly email citizens and neighborhood groups. Partner with community groups who can post project details to their social media accounts and email information to members. The City's Community Assistance Liaisons can also help reach neighborhood groups.
- Social media advertising can reach a larger number of people if you pay to "boost" posts. Facebook allows post boosting in geographic areas as small as a one-mile radius. Twitter allows post boosting by zip code. Next Door is a growing social media platform that is neighborhood based and a good way to communicate with residents.
- For smaller geographic areas, the best communication method is still postcards or even door hangers. These can be more expensive and time consuming than other options, but a postcard with an easy-to-remember website printed on the front will reach more people than any other method. However, for geographic areas larger than a few neighborhoods, postcards are not cost effective.
- Newspaper ads are a way to reach people who don't use social media, but should include project websites as well as a way for people who don't have computer access to request information, such as a phone number to request that project information be mailed to them. Project information, including a contact phone number and surveys, should be mailed to these households.

- Project websites should be easy to remember. Create specific URLs for each project that can forward to another website that may not be as easy to remember, such as www.cityofws.org/publicart, which was used for the public art plan.
- Translate project information for residents who have limited English proficiency.
- Present public input as an opportunity to have a voice in an initiative and make a difference.

Live online meetings

Best practices for virtual meetings are often the same as they are for in-person meetings, but with added layers to consider:

- Limit virtual meetings to one hour or less with segments lasting 15 minutes at most.
- Make sure you designate both a host and a technical moderator to make sure the meeting runs smoothly.
- Virtual meetings require just as much or more planning than in-person meetings. Do a test run of your presentation. Test audio, screen sharing, videos, and the comment box to ensure participants can ask questions.
- Look professional. Dress well and consider your lighting, sound, and background.
- Ensure all presenters have a quiet space they can use during the meeting. Make sure you can run the meeting without being distracted by something around you. Turn off your phone and close browser tabs, especially for email applications.
- Have a clear meeting agenda with clear talking points. Explain to the public what you want feedback on and conclude with clear action items
- Slides should be simple and visual. Presenters should give a brief explanation of the visuals as some members of the public may only be able to phone in.
- During the meeting, encourage people to submit questions via the comment box or chat box. Don't forget to unmute people who call in and want to ask a question during the Q and A section.
- For meetings with multiple topics, hold a short general purpose section of the meeting before breaking out into specialized sessions that concentrate on specialized topics. Offer an opportunity for citizens to attend more than one breakout session per meeting, rotating through topics.
- Use interactive presentation software to better engage citizens and gather feedback in real-time. Services, such as Mentimeter and Mural offer live polls, quizzes, word clouds, and digital sticky notes for participants to help visualize the information in their meeting and have answers tabulated immediately.
- Tell people how they can provide feedback after the meeting is over (such as via an online form, email, or phone call).

Recorded meetings

In addition to a virtual meeting, also provide a recording of the meeting that can be viewed later with a way to submit comments. Best practices for recorded meetings include the following:

- Presentations posted online may need to be formatted differently than those given in person. Image-heavy PowerPoint presentations should be reformatted to ensure they

have adequate information to explain what citizens are being asked to provide feedback on.
- Expand public comment periods to allow more people to participate as they find out about the opportunity for input. For example, if a comment period is typically a month, consider making it 6 weeks.
- Collect or request contact information so you can follow up and close the loop on comments received.

Case study

A recent long-range planning process that relied on many of these best practices has been Walkable Winston-Salem, the City's pedestrian plan update. The plan started in 2020 with a steering committee that included members of community groups that were interested in safe streets for pedestrians. Public meetings were exclusively virtual and pointed citizens to a standalone website, winston-salemwalks.com, which is still collecting citizen input. The website, which is managed by the national planning consulting group Alta Planning + Design, includes an interactive map of the city where participants can identify problems and make recommendations through comments and by drawing directly on the map. The map application has a social media aspect that makes it possible for people to "like," or amplify, other residents' concerns and hold conversations through comment threads.

The interactive map was first posted in March 2020 and there are currently about 700 comments compiled from around the city. As the process unfolded, it was possible to see which areas of the city had no comments. Transportation staff used this information to target those neighborhoods for their input by sending postcards and even conducting in-person interviews. Transportation staff believes this process reached many more citizens than it would have by holding only in-person meetings.

Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned best practices and the experience of PDS and other City staff over the past year, staff is making the following recommendations for how the department should move forward with virtual outreach and planning meetings.

1. Embrace virtual meetings

Continue to use online tools to host virtual meetings, even after the pandemic ends. Given the many advantages of online meetings, notably the ability for citizens to attend meetings and workshops from their home or place of work, it makes sense to add virtual meetings as a standard way to reach citizens in addition to holding in-person meetings. Virtual meetings have the potential to increase citizen participation, especially for the new City-County comprehensive plan. Staff should be sure to reach out to the public by a variety of means.

2. Consider availability of local broadband internet access

Despite the advantages of online meetings, not all citizens have access to broadband internet in their homes. When developing a public outreach strategy for a particular planning area, PDS staff should consider broadband internet availability and advertise virtual and in-person public

meetings in City and County facilities with broadband internet and computer work stations, such as library branches and recreation centers.

3. Invest in multiple outreach methods
With the rise of email and social media platforms, local governments have increasingly relied on these "free" communication methods. However, with more and more messages trying to catch citizens' attention, it is now necessary to target advertising to reach those same citizens. PDS should set aside a larger budget to reach citizens through traditional methods, such as postcards and newspaper advertising, through boosted social media posts, as well as ad content for YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Also set up a system for those without computer access to request information, such as a phone number to request that project information and printed surveys be mailed to them.

4. Use consultant services and specialized software
In order to get the most robust citizen feedback, it may be beneficial to explore the use of consultant services, within the reasonable budget constraints of a project. Transportation staff's experience with Alta Planning + Design's mapping tool was able to collect much more detailed feedback for the City's pedestrian plan than any number of in-person meetings was likely to collect. If we are going to ask citizens to share their time as part of a planning process, we should ensure they have access to tools which allow them to communicate their needs as effectively as possible.

If the Planning Board agrees, staff will incorporate the four recommendations described above into future plans and public outreach efforts, as appropriate.