

# Common Conflict Factors and Pitfalls in Public Participation

(and strategies to overcome them)

Public Engagement



City Planning  
Department



**Benefit threshold:** Subjective assessment about the direct benefits the community will obtain from such purported solutions.

*Description:* The disconnect relies on the inability to establish enough or any benefits that the community will receive as a consequence of the initiative to render the endeavor meaningful in the eyes of the community.

*Example of intent:* we need to incentivize access to healthy foods.

Example of public perception: Our community does not have food deserts, nor does it struggle with diet-related health issues like obesity or cardiovascular diseases. Fresh food is always available.

*Result:* People might perceive the organization's efforts to present a problem and solution as an attempt to convince or re-educate, which will prompt people to come up with their conclusion as to why that course of action is being taken.

*Prevention:*

- Doing appropriate research about whether or not people perceive social, cultural or environmental issues as problems.
- In the same way, it is essential to find out if the potential solution can bring some concrete benefits to the community.
- Communicate public benefits tangibly as they relate to their everyday lives.
- If the project or initiative is still needed, pose it not as a problem to be solved but as a tool to maintain current livability standards or celebrate community aspects.

*Intervention:*

- Involve people who acknowledge the problem to support the creation of awareness about the subject.
- Ideally, these would be underrepresented groups or community organizations with experience in the topic and the community.
- In some instances, like the example above, rephrasing the problem as an opportunity is possible. E.g., if the community does not struggle with access to fresh food but the project still needs to create opportunities for fresh food in the area, then further acknowledge it as a positive thing that the community should take pride in and further reinforce the identity of the community by positing it as a value that is worth being preserved, that other communities can learn from it.



**Prioritization:** The proportion of attention and resources devoted to solutions as they seek to address problems identified in the community.

*Description:* The disconnect relies on how priorities are ordered and phrased. Part of it is semantics and the amount of energy dedicated to solving those problems.

*Examples of decision-maker priorities (in order):* housing, economic development, sustainability

*Examples of public priorities (in order):* sustainability, equity, housing

*Result:* Community members may feel that there is a missed opportunity to address issues that they consider even more important, which results in thoughts and opinions that the organization needs to do more to address their needs. They feel neglected, even though there is significant agreement in other areas, and they are still determining when the next best opportunity to address their needs will manifest. There is also the sense that community members and the organization talk past each other.

*Prevention:*

- Identify community needs and values by priorities.
- Tailor projects strategic communications to convey how the solution addresses community needs. If working on an initiative with many explanations, order how they are presented according to the community priorities.
- Dissipate “group-thinking” by stating which stakeholder groups communicated their priorities and how your project addresses their concerns.

*Intervention:*

- Restate the importance of the solution and how it connects to the priorities you have been hearing from other groups in the community.
- Revise central messages to incorporate language preferences from the community.
- Adjust solutions to incorporate elements that would speak to the community priorities. For example, per the example above, if an area is rezoned as multi-family housing, suggest that the intent is to incentivize housing built with sustainable materials that serve low-income residents.
- If the community’s main priorities are outside your project’s scope, inform them about the relevant initiatives that would be more appropriate to address those needs.



**Decision process mistrust:** Legitimacy of the decision-making process.

*Description:* The disconnect lies in the perceived total or partial lack of clarity or legitimacy in what and how decisions are made, which is informed by the level of transparency, outreach, and engagement that the process manifests.

*Example of information received:* New BRT proposed in the region.

*Example of public perception:* What is a BRT? How does it work? Who will operate it? Where will it be?

*Example of information received:* An online survey is available to inform community needs as part of community plan updates.

*Example of public perception:* The survey omitted key relevant questions.

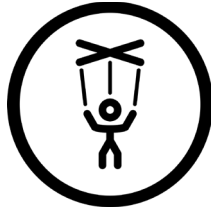
*Result:* When the skepticism is total, trust in the organization may further deteriorate by opinions casting more negative light into the decision-making process. When the skepticism is partial, the process through which the entire initiative is going through might become jeopardized.

**Prevention:**

- Disclose project timelines, budget, schedules, staffing, steps and any other relevant information that is appropriate for the public to be informed about the project's goals and how the organization means to achieve them.
- Be forthcoming about project information. Do not wait too long between when people know something will happen and between explaining the 5 Ws.

**Intervention:**

- Host regular briefings with members of the public about how the project is going and the challenges that are coming up and disclose any new timelines if applicable.
- Host lessons learned sessions where feedback about how to do tasks is compiled and reported to the community to show that the organization is listening.



**Tokenism:** Using legitimate means to excuse the fulfillment of other non-disclosed yet evident goals.

*Description:* The disconnect arises when there is a perception by some members of the public that initiatives hide behind community priorities to satisfy other goals different than those purported to be.

*Example of initiative:* New commercial corridor oriented toward local-owned and small businesses.

*Example of non-disclosed goal perceived by the public:* Re-election strategy and strengthening relationships with commercial developers.

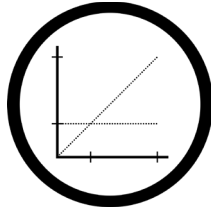
*Result:* Even if people agree that there is a problem and that the proposed solution is the best course of action, people will feel used if they feel they have been lied to or were not told the whole story.

*Prevention:*

- Ensure there are no hidden agendas and avoid convergence of facts and events that would suggest otherwise where appropriate.
- Emphasize how the problem and the solution were identified better to explain the story behind the inception of these ideas.
- Ensure the process is fair, e.g., there is no unfair outside interference.
- Plan to work with engagement partners who are familiar with the community.
- The more people can take credit for the project, the less likely it is for people to associate such credit with a single individual's or organization's agenda.

*Intervention:*

- Reassure people of the intentions behind the project.
- Collaborate with other stakeholder groups so they witness their testimony of the importance of the project.
- Dispel rumors while avoiding engagement with conspiracy theories and similar disinformation.



**Externalities:** Subjective assessment of the different types of costs and how they are weighed against the benefits of the proposed solutions.

*Description:* The disconnect lies in a perceived outweigh of the costs (additional taxes, nuisance, construction times) compared to the received benefits.

*Example of intent:* This project will connect this local avenue's bike lane with the more extensive regional bike path network.

*Example of public perception:* Road closures for the project can last up to two years, and bikers have already found alternate routes to connect to the more extensive network.

*Result:* Ties with the community may deteriorate as they feel ignored about their concerns. They might also feel betrayed because while the community and organization acknowledge the issues, the community feels that the organization is willing to solve them at their expense.

*Prevention:*

- Be proactive in starting the conversations about what the community cost limits should be.
- Acknowledge that the solution may entail some adverse effects in the short term. Be very clear about what those will be and what will not be. List the strategies that will be in place to mitigate them (if any).
- Be even more clear on the short- and long-term benefits. Involve everyone who the adverse effects will directly impact and co-design mitigation strategies.

*Intervention:*

- Form stakeholder committees relevant to each major area of contention to provide recommendations.
- Work with committees to ensure these circumstances can be navigated and mitigated where possible and where other members of the community can reach a compromise.



**Solution appropriateness:** Subjective or objective evaluations of whether the proposed solution is technically or aesthetically appropriate to address the identified problem.

*Description:* The disconnect lies in the public perception that the solution will not address the issue effectively or will only do so partially if it does.

*Example of proposed solution:* Build a public botanical garden with California native plants.

*Example of issue to address:* awareness about using drought-tolerant landscapes.

*Example of proposed solution:* Install a modern nature-inspired sculpture in a hotel within the Gaslamp Quarter district.

*Example of issue to address:* Reinforce neighborhood identity and create new local landmarks.

*Result if ignored:* The public might feel that the staff is not appropriately equipped to tackle the issues in question or that the administration only thinks of time and money and is willing to disregard people's concerns.

*Prevention:*

- Involve people in the initial brainstorming process of the solution (if applicable) and hold participatory planning or design workshops.

*Intervention:*

- Revise solutions to address people's concerns as much as possible.
- Explain why some revisions or feedback could not be incorporated.
- Commit to involve people early in the future for similar projects.



**Inequities:** The lack of meaningful inclusion of marginalized people in the community or those disproportionately affected by the decision.

*Description:* The disconnect lies in how the lack of involvement of those underrepresented groups may affect the quality of the solution, as it is the perception that their inclusion in the conversation could result in a more holistic and appropriate approach. The other side of the coin is that disconnect can also lie in specific sectors or stakeholders directly benefitting from the decision at the expense of others without any right or justification to do so.

*Example of proposed solution:* Earlier public-school class start times and changes in the local district's bus pickup and drop-off schedule.

*Example of underrepresented groups:* Single-parent students with extracurricular activities.

*Example of proposed solution:* Urban streets renewal campaign

*Example of underrepresented group:* The unsheltered.

*Solution:* A new mobility campaign endorses and incentivizes the use of scooters and bike-share programs:

Benefitted group: a limited number of companies will obtain public contracts to implement such mobility platforms.

*Prevention:*

- Do stakeholder mapping exercises to involve underrepresented groups.
- During initial conversations with the communities, ask them who they think should be involved in the discussions.

*Intervention:*

- Once it is brought to your attention that there is a need to involve specific stakeholders, invite them as part of the discussion, hold listening to sessions with them, schedule occasional project briefings, and reach out individually to ask them to community events.





**Value struggle:** Going against community values.

*Description:* The disconnect relies upon the perception of having community values threatened by proposed solutions.

*Example of community value:* natural preservation.

*Example of proposed solution:* more residential and commercial development near nature

*Example of community value:* artistic expression

*Example of proposed solution:* high-tech infrastructure

*Results:* Community members will consider the organization as disregarding, antagonizing or openly contradicting the values they hold dear - which tends to lead to oppositional behavior.

*Prevention:*

- Do a high-level outreach to understand the community's values.
- Compile a list of case studies that have been successful and that have been received positively by the community.
- Orient solutions to strongly suggest a relationship with those community values.

*Intervention:*

- Apologize for the oversight, reassuring people that it was not the intention and that there is room for growth.
- People need to see and tell that you are trying to see things from their perspective.
- Focus the conversation where compromises can be met and generalize it where it is essential to be a team player with other communities to address more extensive needs.



**Double standards:** Going against one's own philosophy.

*Description:* The disconnect lies in how decisions and affairs are conducted, perceived as contradictory by the public based on previous commitments or statements by the decision-makers.

*Example of decision-maker philosophy:* We want more options for alternative mobility.

*Example of public perception:* Street widening projects are happening in the community.

*Example of decision-maker philosophy:* Commitment to elevate and highlight historic and cultural features in the community.

*Example of public perception:* Support and promote modern buildings with different architectural styles in the same neighborhoods.

*Results:* The public will lose trust in the organization. Any effort that has been made collaboratively with that community could be jeopardized. While it is true that people are more generally upset when you contradict them than when you contradict yourself, the government is a bit different. Your interests are supposed to represent them - usually reinforced by promises, policies and reforms to ensure that your office acts on behalf of people's interests. So, when people perceive that you are conducting decisions with double standards, not only do they sense that you are contradicting yourself, but they feel that you are lying and betraying their interests.

*Prevention:*

- Do not commit prematurely to any specific mission that might become a non-priority later in the project.
- Clarify from the get-go how this project's priorities align with previously stipulated goals and point out why they might diverge in some areas and why, ideally, by considering other goals identified by the community or relevant stakeholders.

*Intervention:*

- Clearly state what intended "contradictory" aspects of the project were incorporated.
- Explain why the controversial elements do not go against the current framework or previously agreed values and be transparent about their origins.
- Commend the community for holding the organization accountable.



**Indignity:** Causing reason for offense.

*Description:* The disconnect relies upon the perception of severely inappropriate, offensive language or attitudes from decision-makers or their partners.

*Example of perceived offensive behavior:* Project staff sends only interns to manage and run a public meeting.

*Example of perceived offensive behavior:* Nonverbal communication coming from presenters or decision-makers.

*Results:* Getting past those immediate experiences to engage in substantive conversation will take much work. These situations might lead to likely events where participants are defensive or willing to trade insults. Interactions like this can significantly decrease trust in this project and the organization, leading to meetings and interactions that will take more work to manage.

*Prevention:*

- Have common sense meeting agreements that are not controversial.
- Avoid threats and shows of power when informing that certain behaviors cannot be tolerated.
- Be sensitive about the topics and ensure the project staff is equipped to deal with contentious situations.
- Give topics the seriousness that are deserved.

*Intervention:*

- Immediately apologize for any misperception or misunderstanding.
- Use de-escalation tactics to ensure the situation will not get out of control.
- Remind people of meeting agreements or rules of etiquette (if applicable).
- Reposition arguments, use active listening, nonviolent communication, and other facilitation strategies to minimize the use of any further accusatory statements.



**Hazard perception:** Potential threats associated with the implementation of the solution.

*Description:* The disconnect lies in safety concerns (real or perceived) about the solutions that are planned to be implemented. The public may perceive that though the solutions address the issues, they cause additional problems that may damage health or property.

*Example of proposed solution:* A policy allowing residents to maintain and plant certain rights-of-ways.

*Example of perceived danger:* New vegetation interfering with utilities and causing blackouts and natural disasters like fires or floods.

*Result:* The public might feel that their safety concerns are overlooked, which will become fear and strong opposition to the project.

*Prevention:*

- Conduct a thorough analysis of actual versus perceived risks before pursuing the solution.
- With the help of experts on the topic, communicate beforehand what the solution will address and what it will not cause, along with the measures and enforcement that would prevent any worst-case scenarios.
- Communicate opportunities that the solution will create, and depending on the engagement level, allow community members to decide whether it is worth pursuing.

*Intervention:*

- Dispel rumors about potential risks by doing extensive outreach and awareness about the solution.
- Disclose technical information about the project and how the solution is designed to counter or prevent disasters.
- Hold expert panel discussions about the topic and involve the relevant disaster prevention advocates in the conversations.



**Unilateral decisions:** Decisions taken with limited or without any consultation.

*Description:* The disconnect happens when initiatives take a direction that the public should've scrutinized or appear to have undergone a public engagement process but do not subject themselves to more involved conversations with other stakeholders.

*Example of proposed solution:* We will build a landfill. The community gets to pick one of three pre-selected sites together.

*Example of backlash:* We were not consulted. Why a landfill? Landfills do not work. Why these sites?

*Results:* Community members who disagree with the solutions will take any opportunity to criticize any aspect of the project, leading to “secondary” conflict factors. For example, because the public was not involved early (the main reason for dissatisfaction), they may attribute their dissatisfaction to other aspects of the project (e.g., solution appropriateness, inequity, etc.)

*Prevention:*

- Involve people early in the decision-making process. Identify who the “players” are and bring them on board as key stakeholders so they can also help spread the word about the project.
- It's always harder to criticize one's ideas than somebody else's. Inform people about the constraints of the project (e.g., the things that cannot change) and the opportunity areas (e.g., where there is free range or plenty of decision-making power).
- Emphasize the need to work together throughout the process and commit to sharing information and brief progress reports as often as possible.

*Intervention:*

- Acknowledge the learning experience, highlighting that every community is different and that a one-size-fits-all approach only works sometimes.
- Commend the community for wanting to be involved in significant decisions.
- The community needs to feel that their concerns matter to you and that you are willing to apply them to the point of revisiting the major decisions already made.