This guide is part of the City of Mobile Neighborhood Planning Toolkit, a set of resources to help community groups pro-actively plan for and improve their neighborhoods.

**Toolkit Components**

The toolkit consists of three handbooks.

- **Neighborhood Planning Handbook**
  Describes the purpose of neighborhood planning, and outlines the process for establishing a neighborhood plan.

- **Neighborhood Engagement Handbook**
  Provides guidance for engaging your community to create a plan, implement a project, or other purposes.

- **Neighborhood Initiative Handbook**
  Provides guidance and resources for implementing various types of projects or initiatives within your neighborhood.
There are a variety of ways in which this handbook can be utilized by neighborhoods and community leaders who are interested in getting their residents more involved in where they live. You should consult this handbook when:

**Working on a neighborhood plan**
As explained in Map for Mobile, planning is about people. The Neighborhood Planning Handbook describes the process to create a neighborhood plan. Community engagement is a vital part of that process. This handbook provides guidance to help you conduct community engagement effort for your plan.

**Working on a specific neighborhood project**
After your neighborhood has a plan, you might be interested in implementing a specific project or program. This handbook can help you plan for and think through how to best engage your neighbors for a specific initiative.

**Facing a specific challenge in your neighborhood**
If your neighborhood is facing a challenge or issue and needs to come together for greater impact, this manual can help you understand how to organize with your neighbors to make a larger impact and have a greater voice.
THE PURPOSE: WHY ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY?

Nobody knows a community better than you! Engaging the community ensures that the authentic voice of the residents, business owners, and anyone who cares about the community is involved when making decisions. This is achieved through multifaceted outreach campaigns and a firm commitment to doing what it takes to provide all community members with the opportunity to participate and have their say.

The benefits are many...

Create community buy-in
Encouraging the residents and business owners within your neighborhood to come together to think about the future or solve an immediate issue is a powerful thing.

Create a path to implementation
Community engagement is essential to successful implementation. There will be more buy-in and ownership over the plan or project if the community has been involved along the way.

Build civic capacity
It takes a village! Ongoing community engagement brings neighbors together and builds the civic infrastructure necessary to facilitate change.

Get to know your neighbors
Its fun and rewarding to get to know your neighbors. By working together on improvements, issues or making decisions about the future you will get to know your neighbors in new ways.

“Start where you are... use what you have... do what you can...”

- Arthur Ashe
THE SPIRIT:  PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The following principles should guide each neighborhood as they engage their residents. It is important that everyone know it is a choice to get involved and they feel comfortable and welcome to participate.

Open
Participation in the planning process is a choice, open to anyone who is interested in working to improve their neighborhood.

Inclusive
Getting involved is easy, inviting and as barrier-free as possible for the many different populations of people that live in the neighborhoods of Mobile.

Thoughtful
Meetings, workshops and other events are well-planned and facilitated so that all participants are able to share their ideas and input easily and comfortably.

Respectful
Participation is respectful and equitable so that it fosters collaboration and a better understanding between different opinions, views and interests.

“At the heart of community engagement is the democratic ideal that people who are impacted by a decision or course of action, have the rightful opportunity to shape and form the decision or action before it takes place.”

– Central East Health Integration Network

Different engagement techniques are utilized for different types of gatherings.
THE PROCESS: ENGAGEMENT FOR NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING

The following describes the minimum process requirements for engaging the local community in preparing a neighborhood plan.

REQUIREMENTS

Neighborhood Planning Groups (NPG) are required to host one community-building engagement event at the beginning of the plan process. The type of event is left to the discretion of the neighborhood leaders but should be chosen from the Tactics section of this manual. It must result in the following deliverables which will be the foundation of the neighborhood plan.

› Neighborhood Vision Statement
› Neighborhood Value Statements (3-5)
› Neighborhood priority needs and opportunities

STEPS

There are four steps to executing a community engagement process.

1. DESIGN

1a. Pick your meeting type
Using the tactics section of this handbook select a meeting type that will work for your community and the nature of the input you are interested in gathering.

1b. Pick your input activity
Using the tactics section of this handbook select one or more activities to conduct during your event.

1c: Set location, date and time
Choose a location for your event that is easy to access for all, has convenient parking and will have the resources you might need (tables, chairs, microphone, etc.). Select a date and time that is convenient for your group and that does not conflict with other community meetings or events.

Tips for planning a successful event
› Develop goals and objectives, what do you hope to achieve?
› Organize to a team to help host.
› Set a date several months in advance.
› Name your event. Come up with a fun and creative name that will capture people’s attention.
› Create a plan/agenda for the event.
› Identify and establish partnerships and sponsors.
2. PROMOTE

It is very important that getting involved be easy, inviting and as barrier-free as possible for the many different populations of people that live in the neighborhoods of Mobile. At a minimum, all neighborhood public events must be submitted to the City for public notification.

In order to ensure broad participation, neighborhoods are encouraged to also conduct their own outreach and publicity about any public event. Below are some tips and considerations for reaching out to your community.

2a. Identify your neighbors

Identify all stakeholders and community members within your planning area boundary. Think about all the different populations such as churches, schools, and major employers. See the outreach worksheet in the resources section of the handbook. Groups to consider are:

› CAG, HOA or NPG (Neighborhood Planning Group)
› Churches
› Schools
› Major employers
› Major housing developments or apartment buildings
› Harder-to-reach groups (minorities, non-English speakers, etc.)
› Community or civic groups (garden clubs, rotary, lions, etc.)

2b. Identify best communication channels

After you have your list of stakeholders decide on the best method to reach out to each population to invite them to get involved. Think about if groups have meetings where you could publicize an upcoming public event, or which groups have newsletters or email blasts where information could be included.

2c. Conduct outreach

It can be challenging to get people to take interest in a planning process or come out to a public meeting. Below are a series of ideas about how to get the word out about your planning process and public event etc.

› Utilize the City Website
› Promote on Social Media
› Post on Next Door App
› Send notification through direct mail
› Include information in utility bills
› Write article for a community magazine or newsletter
› Attend a community event
› Post on a community bulletin board
› Promote in the neighborhood schools (take-home folders, teacher mailboxes)
› Include in church bulletins or announcements
3. FACILITATE

It is essential that your event be well planned and facilitated so that people feel comfortable to share their ideas. Some tips for a well planned event are listed below

› **Be interactive.** Be sure to keep the formal presentation to a minimum so there is plenty of time for interaction and input gathering.

› **Be small.** No matter the size of the overall group of people, break into small groups of 6-8 for discussion activities.

› **Be fun.** Don’t be boring and stay away from planning jargon or industry terms.

› **Be organized.** People are more likely to stay involved or come back out for another event if they have a good experience at the first one and felt their input was recorded properly and will be used.

4. DOCUMENT

After the event you should document the findings and prepare a summary for inclusion in your neighborhood plan. The summary should cover:

› What you did

› Who you heard from

› What you learned

OUT OF THE BOX OUTREACH...

Getting people to come out and participate in their communities is often a challenge. Below are some ideas to get beyond the conventional approach to getting your neighbors interested.

**Throw a party**

Food, drinks and fun usually get people’s attention. Try to plan a fun event and then fold in some business like getting people’s input or letting people know about another opportunity to get involved in their neighborhood planning process.

**Host series of house gatherings**

Ask people to host small gatherings with their immediate neighbors. People are most likely to attend if they are invited by a person they know and trust. If you have a lot of small groups participating, it will add up to a great effort.

**Tag onto an existing event**

Already have an existing community event like a block party that is well attended? No need to compete, just use this event to do some work on your neighborhood plan. You could have an activity booth, hand out flyers, make a short presentation as part of a formal program, or simply talk to people and let them know about the opportunity to get involved in their neighborhood planning.
THE TACTICS: APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There are two important considerations to think about when inviting your community together for an engagement event: the type of meeting or gathering, and the type of activities that take place at that gathering. Here are some ideas, tips and resources focused on types of meetings and meaningful activities.

TYPES OF MEETINGS

**Workshop**
A workshop is a highly interactive hands-on event where people work together in small groups to participate in a variety of activities and or discussions. Most workshops are between 1.5 and 3 hours in length.

**Open House**
An open house is a self-directed drop-in event with display boards or other material to review. There is minimal formal presentation in order to allow people to review material and provide comments at their own pace.

**Focus Group**
A focus group is a gathering of a small group of people (no more than 8-10) that may have similar interests or backgrounds so they can provide a clear snapshot or picture of a particular situation or issue in the community. Examples could be a focus group of teachers or single moms.
**Meeting in a box**

These kits are designed to be self-facilitated and will help fill-in the outreach holes by taking the messages and information to the people, especially the hard to reach members of the community. The “meeting in a box” kit will include talking points, handouts, exercises and other engagement tools needed to communicate with the public about the project and gather input on specific items.

**Stakeholder Interviews**

A stakeholder interview is a very small gathering of 2-4 people focused around a set of key or critical questions.

**Door knocking**

Door knocking can be an effective tool to reach residents who can’t or are not interested in coming out to a public event. Door knocking is most effective if you keep your questions or inquiry short and simple.
After you choose your type of gathering then you will need to decide on the activity or activities you want to conduct at your gathering to best engage the participants. The following pages provide an overview of different activities to gather meaningful input from your neighbors. They are organized into two categories:

**Foundational Activities**

The most general in nature and adaptable to the most amount of user groups. These should be the activities first considered when planning an event.

**Advanced Activities**

These more pointed activities hone in on specific types of input and should be considered when there is a specific target or outcome needed. These are best used to address a particular issue or a community need.

- Critical Questions.......................... 12
- Write the Headline........................... 14
- Seek the Treasure............................ 15
- Strong Places, Weak Places..............16
- World Café..................................... 18
- Tactical Urbanism............................ 19
- Individual Input............................... 20
- Image Dialogue............................... 22
- Map Your Assets.............................. 23
CRITICAL QUESTIONS

To gather lots of ideas around a topic or critical question.

The critical questions format is used to conduct an open brainstorm with a group to gather as many ideas as possible. This technique does not force agreement and consensus; rather it provides a snapshot of responses. If consensus emerges it is noted, but that is not the purpose or desired outcome of this activity. If the dialogue reveals specific areas of disagreement those are noted as well.

Appropriateness
Critical questions is one of the most adaptable techniques and works well with most types of gatherings or size of group. It is most useful at the beginning of a process when gathering lots of different ideas through an open brainstorm is most beneficial.

Timing
This activity can be easily customized to fit most any length of time, however you should allow at least 5-10 minutes per question to allow people time to think and record their ideas.

Materials
› Post-it notes (5 each per question)
› Pens and pencils
› Flip chart or large sheet of paper
› Multi-colored markers

Steps
1. Choose your questions. For example questions see page 13.
2. Set up tables that seat 6-8 people. Encourage people to fill up one table before sitting at an empty table.
3. Have the table leader or meeting facilitator read the question to the group.
4. Ask the participants to record each of their ideas or responses to the question on a post-it note. Each post-it note should only contain one idea.
5. When everyone is finished recording their ideas ask participants to place all their post-it notes in the center of the table.
6. Read each of the ideas aloud
7. Working as a group, discuss the ideas.

Summarizing/Analyzing
› Review all the post-it notes and identify major themes such as transportation, housing, safety etc.
› Move the post-it to large sheet of paper and label with organizing themes.
Facilitation Tips

› Create an environment that is open and inviting to gain the most feedback.
› Make sure no one individual is overtaking the conversation.
› Allow all participants to have a say.
› Go around the table and ask individuals to share one idea at a time, this will help spread the conversation.
› Help move the conversation along by asking questions in response to ideas.
› Record all ideas regardless of personal view, there are no bad ideas.
› Try to dive deeper with questions, for example, “How would that benefit the community?”
› If part of a larger meeting format, make sure to keep the group on schedule.

Example Questions

› What should we do today to make our neighborhood the best it can be in the future?
› What are your big ideas for our neighborhood?
› What are your top three concerns about our neighborhood?
› What are the biggest opportunities for the future of our neighborhood?
› How can we improve our neighborhood?
› What are our neighborhood’s barriers to success?
› How can our neighborhood work together better?
Foundational Activity

WRITE THE HEADLINE

To get people thinking about the future they envision for their neighborhood.

This technique gets people thinking about the future by asking them to write what the newspapers will be reporting on in 20-30 years. This activity is a fun and creative way to get people thinking about what they want the future to be like in an open and unrestrained way.

Appropriateness

This activity is most useful in helping a neighborhood identify long-term goals and gather input that can be used to craft a vision statement. Because this activity is focused and short in length, it can be done in a variety of formats including at a workshop, in a focus group or at a community event booth.

Timing

5-10 minutes

Materials

› Large-sized index cards (5.5x8.5)
› Pens and pencils

Steps

1. Have people close their eyes and imagine their neighborhood in 10, 15 or even 20 years. What are the newspapers saying or reporting on, what is the headline or top news from your neighborhood?
2. After setting the stage, ask participants to write down what they think or hope the headline will be.
3. If this is one activity as part of a larger gathering like a workshop, consider posting the headline cards so people can read them at the end of the meeting on their way out.

Summarizing/Analyzing

› Review all the headline cards and identify major themes that could be organized into vision statement.
› Photograph all cards for record and to use in future possible activities or promotions.

Participants filled out treasure cards forecasting what they think the headline will be for their community in 20 years.

Participants filled out treasure cards forecasting what they think the headline will be for their community in 20 years.
Foundational Activity

**SEEK THE TREASURE**

**To identify what people value about the neighborhood today.**

This activity asks people to write down what they treasure most in their community. This activity helps to articulate a set of values for the neighborhood based upon what people treasure most.

**Appropriateness**

This activity is most useful in helping a neighborhood identify their values by asking people to list what they treasure most about the community. This activity is simple and quick and can be adapted to fit most meeting formats.

**Timing**

5-10 minutes

**Materials**

› Large index cards
› Pens and pencils

**Steps**

1. Ask participants to close their eyes and think about the elements of the neighborhood that they treasure most.
2. Fill out an index card for each treasure element.
3. If this is one activity as part of a larger gathering like a workshop, consider posting the treasure cards so people can read them at the end of the meeting on their way out.

**Example prompts**

› What I treasure most is...
› (Location)'s biggest opportunity is...
› This is important to me!

**Summarizing/Analyzing**

› Review all the submitted cards and identify major themes
› Organize the index cards by theme that could be organized into value statements.

Participants place “This is Important to Me!” dots on the recommendations they feel should first be implemented. They also write why on the comment card to help the planning team prioritize actions.
Foundational Activity

STRONG PLACES, WEAK PLACES

To identify neighborhood assets and opportunities.

This exercise uses a map of the planning area and asks participants to identify on the map specific locations that represent strong places and weak places. The identification of strong places leads to an understanding of what makes those places strong. The identification of weak places leads to an exploration of why those places are weak. Places of opportunity orient participants toward identifying solutions. This technique is very useful to link participants’ thinking to the physical reality of a community.

Participants place dots on a map to indicate their opinion of the strong and weak places in the community.

Appropriateness

This activity is most useful in a workshop setting where people can not only indicate the strong and weak places on the map but also discuss as a group why those are strong or weak.

Timing

30-45 minutes

Materials

› 11x17 map of the planning area (1 for each person)
› One large simple map of planning area (poster or table size)
› Green sticker dots (1/4” size) (3 per person)
› Red sticker dots (1/4” size) (3 per person)
› Markers, at least two colors

Steps

1. Have participants think about places in the area that are strong and weak (see the descriptions on the next page). Ask them to note on their 11x17 map, strong places with a circle and weak places with an “x.” This individual step will make step 2 go more smoothly.

2. Using the large group map, each participant should then place 3 green sticker dots on their top 3 strong places and 3 red dots on their top 3 weak places. This transfers their individual work to the group map. Several participants can do this step together.

3. After everyone has placed their dots, look for clusters of dots to identify priority areas for discussion. Circle the top three areas for each category of strong and weak, and write the name of the area on the map.

4. As a group, discuss why each area was identified as strong or weak. Record all responses.

Summarizing/Analyzing

› Summary of strong places and weak places (what they are) and why each place is strong or weak
› General themes or characteristics of strong places and weak places (values)
› This summary can be conveyed as area assets (strengths to protect) and opportunities (weaknesses to address)
Strong Places are...
› Desirable to visit
› Special to you in a positive way
› Represent conditions you’d like to replicate
› Reflect well on the community

Weak Places are...
› Offers great potential beyond current condition
› Undesirable to visit, possibly unsafe
› Represents conditions you would like to see less of in the community
› Intervention needed, perhaps through redevelopment

Examples of the strong places, weak places activity.
Advanced Activity

WORLD CAFE

To discuss and develop a shared understanding of a specific topic.

Through a series of questions discussed in very small groups that split-up and re-form with each question, participants consider each other’s ideas and perspectives and build a shared understanding of the topic.

Group discussion during a workshop.

Appropriateness

This activity is most useful when a shared understanding of a specific topic or idea is needed.

Timing

60-90 minutes

Materials

› Butcher block paper to cover each table
› Colored pens, pencils or markers
› A table recording sheet

Steps

1. Tables should be set up for three to five people. Have participants distribute themselves evenly among the tables.

2. Participants will respond to several rounds of questions. After each round, participants shuffle to new tables, leaving one person behind at their original tables to act as facilitator. Mixing the groups up between each question ensures people relate to everyone, not just their friends, and helps build a sense of cohesion about the vision.

3. Participants should use the butcher block paper to write or draw ideas for the next group to see.

4. At the end of the activity, tables share with the larger group the final results of their table conversation.

Summarizing/Analyzing

› Summary of ideas shared during the session
› Themes of ideas shared

Helpful Resources

› The World Cafe Method: theworldcafe.com

To discuss and develop a shared understanding of a specific topic.
Advanced Activity

TACTICAL URBANISM

To demonstrate and raise support for a potential future neighborhood project.

Tactical Urbanism is a real-world strategy that allows a community to test out a proposed project temporarily before investing time and money in a permanent solution. Not only does it draw attention and allow neighbors to experience what is being planned, it offers the community an opportunity to come together and get involved.

It is important to engage City officials prior to planning and executing a tactical urbanism strategy on public land or within public right-of-way.

Appropriateness
This activity allows communities to test new design concepts before making substantial commitments. These can be physical manifestations of existing proposals, new designs, or forms of urban repair.

Timing
One day - one week

Materials
› Inexpensive, temporary materials; these don’t have to last for longer than a few days
› Investigate opportunities to get local businesses involved by asking for donations.

Steps
1. Pick an important issue in your neighborhood that needs attention. This could be the need for more parks and playgrounds; the lack of sidewalks or bike lanes, a less than beautiful streetscape, or something else.
2. Working with City officials to secure the appropriate permissions, design a short-term intervention to draw attention to the problem and pose viable solutions.
3. Call out the troops! You will need lots of hands to quickly install your project. Spread the word and get your neighbors involved.
4. Be sure to talk to people about the experience. Ask for their feedback and if they would like to see it installed permanently.

Summarizing/Analyzing
› Summary of the experiences had by participants
› Photographs of installation to share the physical elements installed for those unable to attend themselves

Helpful Resources
› The Tactical Urbanist’s Guides: tacticalurbanismguide.com/guides
› Team Better Block: teambetterblock.com/how-to-build-a-better-block/
› Pavement to Parks - parklet manual: pavementtoparks.org/parklets/

Tactical urbanism projects are often employed to demonstrate an alternative use for a space.
INDIVIDUAL INPUT

To gather individualized input on topics.

Surveys can be used to obtain a snapshot of the community and also provides a directed or open-ended input opportunity. Questions may be very specific about particular objectives or allow 'fill-in-the-blank' submissions. These can be administered in person, in addition to another event, or as an online resource.

Appropriateness
This technique can be used for groups of any size to collect information on personal preferences or opinions. People can participate in person, or surveys can be adapted for distribution online. This is most effective for collecting votes and making choices between options.

Timing
Varies depending on length of survey

Materials
› Copies of your survey
› Pens and pencils

Steps
1. Build your survey, either as an online form or a word document. Be sure to provide clear instructions regarding how many options may be selected for each question, etc.
2. Explain to participants the purpose and content of the survey and how the results will be used.
3. Allow participants an appropriate amount of time to respond to the survey individually. You may wish for responses to remain anonymous or to collect contact information.
4. Be sure to give a deadline for filling out the survey.

Summarizing/Analyzing
› Database and identify common themes throughout responses.
› If conducting an online survey, most online survey tools will provide a summary view of the results.

Helpful Resources
› Google Forms: g suite.google.com/learning-center/products/forms/get-started/
› surveymonkey.com
USING ONLINE SURVEY TOOLS

Multiple free tools are available online for creating surveys that can be distributed by email or social media. Including an online input tool may help you reach a wider sector or your community and allows for participation on peoples’ own schedules. However, online input cannot replace in-person meetings; rather it should be used as a supplement to open community meetings.

Google Forms

Google Forms are simple and easy to use if you have a Google account. There are no limits on the number of responses you may receive in Google Forms.

1. Open your Google Drive at drive.google.com
2. In the upper left corner, click the blue “NEW” button
3. Click “Google Forms” (This may be under “More”). A new blank form will load in a new window.
4. In the space labeled “Untitled Form”, click and type in the name of your survey.
5. There are multiple question types that can be used. Choose whether you want the responses to the question to be in the form of a short text answer, long paragraph, multiple choice, check boxes, dropdown list, linear scale, multiple choice grid, date, or time.
6. In the space labeled “Untitled question”, type your first question. For multiple choice, check box or dropdown questions, type in the answer choices in the spaces labeled “add option”.
7. To add additional questions, click on the plus sign symbol to the right of your question and repeat the above steps.
8. Once you have added all of your questions and your survey is ready to send, click on the white “send” button in the upper right-hand part of the page. You can send the form directly by email by entering the recipient’s email addresses in the box that pops up. To share the survey by sending a link, click on the hyperlink icon at the top of the box. Click “copy” at the bottom right of the box to copy the link to the clipboard. Then, you can paste the link directly into an email body, an email listserv form, or a social media post.
9. Once you are ready to view the survey results, click on the “responses” tab at the top of the survey page. Here you can see the number of responses and graphic summaries of the results. There is also a toggle button labeled “accepting responses”; by clicking on this button you may turn the survey off when you no longer want to accept new responses.

Survey Monkey

Survey Monkey provides a larger number of question options and is more customizable than Google Forms. However, the free version of the software will only allow you to include 10 questions and receive 100 responses per survey. The Survey Monkey website, surveymonkey.com, provides a number of tutorials on how to create a survey.

Further instructions on creating and managing a Google form can be found at: gsuite.google.com/learning-center/products/forms/get-started/
Advanced Activity

**IMAGE DIALOGUE**

*To use an image as a starting point for a discussion or brainstorm.*

This technique uses a set of images as the focal point for raising and discussing critical questions. The image sets engage a different part of the brain than words, encouraging creativity and openness to new ideas. They also give participants a jumping-off point to talk about their “vision” in very concrete terms, and help engage those participants less willing to engage in more abstract concepts.

**Appropriateness**

This activity is most useful when there is a specific issue, challenge or opportunity that has a physical component that needs input or reaction. For example participants may be asked to react to different types of architecture for a new development or talk about what types of benches would be appropriate in a historic district public space.

**Timing**

15-45 minutes

**Materials**

- Image(s) for discussion (multiple copies if working with a series of small groups)
- Pens and pencils

**Steps**

1. Ask participants to study the image(s) in relation to a key question.
2. Prompt individuals about their ideas in a clear and concise manner.
3. Record all ideas and feedback at each image

**Summarizing/Analyzing**

- Summarize the input into themes of what was heard most often

Participants react to a series of images as a discussion focal point.
Advanced Activity

MAP YOUR ASSETS

To locate the physical assets of a community and develop an existing conditions map.

This workshop gets people engaged in analyzing their neighborhood in physical terms. By working in small groups to identify a series of features on neighborhood maps, including gateways, parks and open space, important buildings, and landmarks, people develop an understanding of the patterns on the ground. Participants can also identify strengths and weaknesses as well. The final map will provide a rich set of information about existing conditions.

Appropriateness

This activity is most useful in a workshop setting where people can discuss and work together in small groups to identify the physical assets that make up their community.

Timing

45 minutes - 1 hour

Materials

› Large, simple map of area
› Sticker dots (1/4” size)
› Different color markers
› List of general community assets as prompts for items to identify.

Steps

› Ask participants to share ideas about each type of community asset.
› One person acts as the table recorder to draw circles, place dots and note up the map.

Summarizing/Analyzing

› Summary of locations shared during the session
› Themes of ideas shared