

# WORK SESSION AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

City Council



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## STAFF

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## SUBJECT FOR DISCUSSION

### Role of Community Engagement in Policy Making

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this item is to share the City's engagement process when seeking input from community members. The aim is to build a consistent process and shared language around how community input is sought during the policy development process and to seek input from City Council on this process.

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## GENERAL DIRECTION SOUGHT AND SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED

1. Does the role engagement plays in the policy development process align with the feedback you have provided?
2. What other feedback does Council have about the role of engagement in Council decisions?

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## BACKGROUND / DISCUSSION

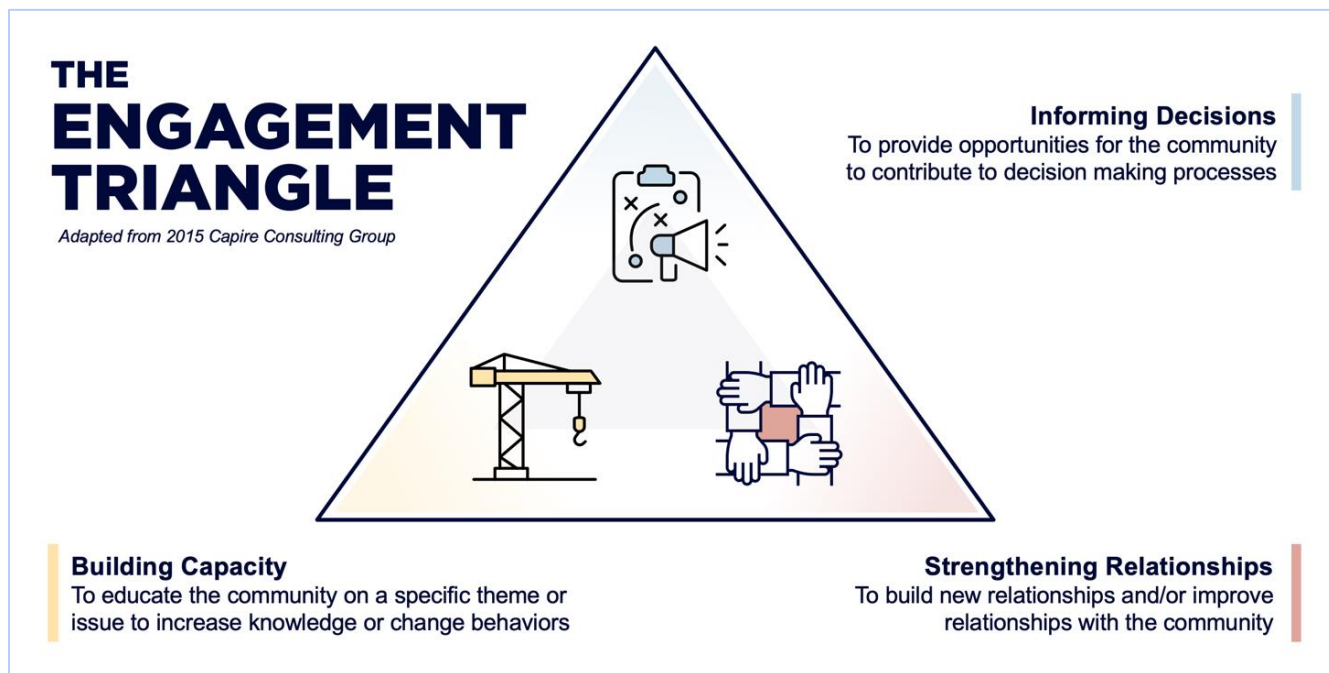
### Background

The City of Fort Collins has developed its approach to community engagement over more than a decade, shaped by Council direction. Engagement is a core function of the City and plays an important role in shaping decisions, building trust and strengthening relationships with the community. Over the past decade, the City has expanded its commitment to engagement. Key milestones include the first Public Engagement Strategic Plan in 2012, creation of a Public Engagement Guide in 2016, Council's Reimagine Community Engagement priority in 2019, a related Council work session in 2020, updates connected to communications and equity work in 2021 and 2024 and the 2025 Public Engagement Assessment. This history provides context for the current effort to build a clear, consistent, efficient and effective approach across the organization that helps ensure community member perspectives are included in decision-making processes.

### Defining Engagement

Engagement is a broad term that can mean many things. Our working definition as a City for engagement: the strategies, processes, tools and techniques used to plan and conduct public participation, outreach, education, events and relationship management. The Engagement Triangle, adapted from Capire

Consulting Group (2015), is used as a high-level framework to describe three common outcomes of engagement: informing decisions, building capacity, and strengthening relationships.



- Informing decisions: This includes how we seek input from the community to make decisions. The City most often refers to this as public participation and adopted the International Association of Public Participation spectrum for this.



Level	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
<b>Promise</b>	Keep you informed	+ listen to and show how input considered	+ include input directly in alternatives	+ your advice and recommendations in solutions	+ we will implement what you decide
<b>Example</b>	City-led communications campaign	City-led survey or listening session	City-led advisory group, task force	Co-led Civic Assembly gives recommendation to Council	Community-led Civic Assembly makes decision, Citizen-initiated ballot measure

- Building Capacity: This includes informing or educating the community on certain topics, often to encourage behavior change. This is commonly achieved through education, outreach and events. Communications, marketing and public relations are also important for this work.
- Strengthening Relationships: Relationships are key to successful engagement and are critical for centering diverse community voices regularly and over time. When engagement is less transactional and more relational, we see better outcomes.

## **Why does engagement matter?**

City organizations exist to provide services in their communities. Understanding community needs and desires is crucial for making informed, sustainable decisions. The National Civic League defines the importance of these relationships and processes as civic capital, “the formal and informal relationships, networks, and capacities that communities use to make decisions and solve problems.” They include seven components of civic capital that relate directly to engagement – engaged residents, inclusive community leadership, collaborative institutions, embracing diversity and equity, authentic communication, culture of engagement and shared vision and values. In an increasingly polarized political environment, building trust with community members through understanding community perspectives is crucial. While agreement on an issue is not always possible or feasible, understanding shared perspectives helps us move forward as a community together.

The City’s vision for engagement is to create a clear, inclusive, and trustworthy process that helps community members take part in the conversations and decisions that affect their lives. Engagement is meant to do more than share information. It is intended to build trust, improve customer experience, connect community perspectives to Council actions, and make sure people are well informed and have meaningful access to participate. This vision also emphasizes partnership with community groups, reducing barriers to participation, and working toward solutions with the people most affected by City decisions. Overall, the goal is for community members to feel welcomed into civic processes, understand how to participate, and see how their input influenced the outcome. This reflects the City’s values of partnership, service, integrity, belonging, safety and wellbeing, and sustainability, and aligns with the International Association for Public Participation framework, which holds that people affected by a decision should have a meaningful role in the process and should be told how their participation shaped the decision.

## **2025 Public Engagement Assessment**

In 2025, the City conducted an assessment to evaluate the current system of engagement, identify opportunities for improvement and develop recommendations to support staff and improve the community’s experience with City processes. Drivers for this assessment included Council input, budget constraints and a desire for increased effectiveness and efficiency. The assessment revealed that engagement is happening across many parts of the organization, but practices, tools, and relationships are often spread across service areas. The assessment identified a need for clearer purpose, earlier planning, and better-defined roles so that community members experience a more predictable process and staff have a clearer way to plan, coordinate, and report engagement. This direction also aligns with City goals related to trust, belonging, access, and meaningful opportunities for people to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

The assessment also highlighted guiding principles that inform how we implement engagement as a City. These include:

- **The City organization as part of the community:** The City aims to work with the community, not just for the community. This means building reciprocal relationships, partnering on solutions, and shaping decisions in ways that are more community-centered and more likely to build trust.
- **Start with what we have:** The City will begin by making better use of existing staff, tools, and systems before seeking new resources. This includes strengthening training, coordination, collaboration, and use of current technology.
- **Build culture to build capacity:** The City is leading this work through culture, recognizing that strong engagement depends on shared values, ethics, and staff judgment rather than one fixed method. Clear guidelines are also important because they create common expectations and shared language for staff, leaders, elected officials, and community members.

- A focus on relationships: The City sees lasting relationships with residents, community groups, businesses, and partners as essential to better decisions and better service. This principle shifts engagement away from one-time transactions and toward ongoing relationships that support thoughtful and sustainable decision-making.
- A focus on simplicity: Engagement can involve complex issues, but the process around it should be as clear and simple as possible. The City will work toward straightforward roles, systems, and communication to reduce confusion and improve alignment.
- Make evidence-based decisions: Engagement work at the City is grounded in feedback, analysis, and alignment with broader City priorities. The City intends to continue using data, learning, and collaboration to guide engagement improvements over time.

### **Role of Engagement in Policy Development**

In the policy development process, engagement is intended to support decision-making by bringing community perspectives into key stages of work, especially during issue identification, problem definition and scoping, and development of policy options. Feedback staff have heard from Council is that engagement should be thoughtful and strategic, reflect broader community perspectives, build trust, and begin early enough to inform the work before decisions are finalized. As proposals move closer to Council deliberation and final action, the level and method of engagement may change, but it remains important to be clear about the decision to be made, who the decision maker is, what role the community will have, and how input will be used.

This work session is intended to share a consistent process and shared language for how community engagement fits into policy development and to seek Council feedback on that approach. In future Council discussions, staff proposes using a more consistent summary of the policy question, decision point, public role, engagement approach, what was heard, and how community input affected the proposal.

### **NEXT STEPS**

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Next steps are to understand Council perspectives on the role of engagement in the policy development processes and to include engagement in upcoming Council topics as appropriate.

### **ATTACHMENTS / LINKS**

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1. Presentation