

MEMO

DATE: March 3, 2022

TO: Planning Commission Members

FROM: Bill Cantin, Neighborhood Communications Coordinator

Re: Comprehensive Plan Public Outreach Research and Recommendations

In preparation for a formal update to Columbia Imagined, staff conducted a review of the comprehensive plans of peer communities and their public outreach approaches. In response to Commissioner questions made during the December 10, 2021 work session staff has prepared a follow-up report to address that discussion. Staff also engaged in additional research focusing on public engagement processes conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic to discern what strategies were employed to ensure engagement was optimized. The findings of this additional research are presented below as well.

Plan Ambassadors/Consultant Relationship

A critical component of the public outreach process for the Columbia Imagined update is engaging historically marginalized groups, including Black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC). A best practice identified to achieve this end is the Plan Ambassador approach used to great affect by the City of Minneapolis. Ideally, Plan Ambassadors are selected for their connection to the community and lead working groups of 15-20 people soliciting their input and keeping them engaged throughout the entire process. The overall process is coordinated by a consultant with expertise in conducting public engagement in tandem with City staff.

The ideal consultant for the Columbia Imagined update should have extensive knowledge and experience in the coordination of public engagement and in the analysis of the information collected during the course of the process. The consultant needs to have expertise in both in-person and virtual engagement, and be able to implement a wide variety of tools, including:

- Community dialogues
- Social media promotion
- Stakeholder interviews
- Surveys and polling
- Virtual meetings/webinars

To effectively implement this strategy, the consultant will rely on the Plan Ambassadors' knowledge of and relationship with the community to bring people to the table, with assistance from City staff and other primary stakeholders.

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Virtual Public Engagement


The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an immediate shift to virtual communication. Traditional in-person meetings switched to online services such as Zoom and Google Meet. Reliance on web-based information such as online surveys and polls became more common place than before. Staff researched multiple communities and public agencies to assess their experiences with virtual communication, and a consensus opinion quickly emerged—virtual engagement did bring new people to the table, but did not replace the need for in-person meetings. Ultimately, a mix of the two approaches will be needed for public engagement processes going forward.

The best summary of this evolution in public engagement is an article from the American Planning Association (APA), “Lessons From Transportation Planners’ Pivot to Virtual Engagement” (<https://www.planning.org/planning/2021/fall/lessons-from-transportation-planners'-pivot-to-virtual-engagement/>). Important points made in this article include:

- Multiple communities and agencies saw a bump in meeting attendance at the advent of online engagement, including Suffolk County, NY and the New Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA)
- These agencies found they were better able to accommodate people living with physical or mobility issues
- Many agencies felt that virtual engagement lacks the full connections made possible by in-person meetings, including the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)
- Going forward, a hybrid approach will be necessary as the changes brought about by the pandemic will not be going away

Staff concurs that a hybrid approach to the Columbia Imagined update public engagement process will be required. If done correctly, this process should greatly enhance public participation, particularly in the case of historically underserved communities.

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Revitalize, Renew, Recover: Health Department's Engagement Process for ARPA Funds as a Possible Model

The Columbia/Boone County Department of Public Health and Human Services has been tasked by City Council to conduct a public engagement campaign to determine funding priorities for the \$25 million provided to the City through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Though far more limited in scope and taking place over a much shorter time period than the Columbia Imagined update, this program provides an additional model to consider. It is broken into three main stages:

- Stage One - Multiple avenues for public input including voting on funding priorities in both physical and virtual systems
- Stage Two – Based on Stage One feedback, 10 focus groups are formed to meet both in-person and virtually to gather additional input from the community
- Stage Three – Staff analyses input and then prepares and presents final recommendations report to City Council

Following Council's decision, the Health Department will issue RFPs to agencies based on the final approved funding priorities. The total time proposed for the process, from hiring staff for program coordination to the submittal of the final report to City Council is eight months.

Next Steps

Staff has developed an approach to moving the Columbia Imagined update forward over the next several months:

- Final recommendations and budget estimate review with Planning and Zoning Commission in May 2022
- Planning requests funding for Columbia Imagined update during FY 2023 budget discussions in July 2022
- Assuming approval, staff begins initial work on process, including data gathering and development of RFP for consultant in October 2022
- Selection of consultant and beginning of the Columbia Imagined update public engagement process during first quarter of CY 2023

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