LISTEN UP!

Rebuilding Trust Through Community Engagement Report

Atlanta 2008
Greetings,

Effective community engagement has been challenging in the City of Atlanta for quite some time. Both government agency staff and the larger community have experienced the challenges and frustrations. The staff is often frustrated with the lack of turnout for key meetings and dismayed by resident expressions of mistrust of the agency, process and staff. Meanwhile, residents are often frustrated by the perceived lack of transparency and limited information sharing in the decision making process.

This is especially the case when residents carry recent memories of being left behind in the past as the city has moved forward with development plans in their neighborhoods. Many residents have shared stories of their families being displaced by major development projects including the airport, the highway system, Fulton County Stadium/Turner Field, the 2006 Olympics, and the massive dismantling of public housing projects, to name a few. As the Atlanta metropolitan area continues to become more densely populated and re-creates itself into a “Best in Class City,” residents that have endured previous phases of the transformation will feel the growing pains.

Georgia Stand-Up is particularly concerned about the impact of this growth and change on historic communities of color that sometimes view development happening “on them and not with them in mind”. As the city agencies make plans to grow Atlanta more strategically in the next twenty-five to fifty years, it is becoming increasingly important that they pay much more attention to the manner in which the public is informed, engaged, consulted and empowered to participate in the decision making process.

With this in mind, Georgia STAND-UP offers this report and its companion piece “Listening in, Listening Out” as guides to help improve community engagement in Atlanta. We hope that by sharing this community engagement report, partnering with other community based organizations and agencies, elevating the discussion and continuing to offer a space for real dialog about these and other issues, we will raise the level of public participation and engagement and truly impact the decision making process.

Peace & Progress,

Deborah Scott
About the Organization

Georgia Strategic Alliance for New Directions and Unified Policies (Georgia STAND-UP), “A Think and Act Tank for Working Communities”, is the only Georgia alliance of leaders representing community, faith, academic, and labor organizations which organizes and educates communities about issues related to economic development. The organization’s goal is to alleviate poverty and encourage regional equity through the empowerment of leaders and the inclusion of community benefits and the mission is to provide information and resources to help create healthy, livable neighborhoods while respecting the right of existing residents to benefit from the progress and developments taking place within their communities.

PROGRAMS AT A GLANCE

Research
Georgia STAND-UP conducts and presents the findings of research to help ensure effective policies are created to benefit local communities. This research, often conducted with direct input and participation of community leaders and academic partners, frames the important issues facing neighborhoods and assists those communities in making systematic change.

The Georgia STAND-UP Alliance
The Georgia STAND-UP Alliance is comprised of leaders representing community, faith, academic, and labor organizations that work together on various projects to affect change within the communities the organization serves. Facilitated by Georgia STAND-UP staff, Alliance meetings include networking and information, idea and resource sharing among members. As a group, the Alliance researches various community projects, discusses options and opportunities and makes recommendations for the benefit of a community.

The Policy Institute for Civic Leadership
The Policy Institute for Civic Leadership is an eight session training course that brings together community and faith leaders, service organization representives, and policy-makers to grow in knowledge about the issues that affect local communities. Topics range from regional history and civics to economics and public finance. Upon graduation, Institute participants can take newfound understanding back to their communities and organizations to organize change.

Community Enrichment Workshops
Community Enrichment Workshops are offered periodically throughout the year to build the skills of leaders in specific areas. Resource sharing, brainstorming and networking are encouraged.

Community Benefits Campaigns and Agreements
A formal product of the Alliance, a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) is a legally enforceable contract signed by a community group and developer which outlines a range of community benefits the developer agrees to provide as part of a development project. A win-win for both the community and the developer, a CBA promotes inclusiveness and coalition building while facilitating the project approval process and providing a method of accountability to the community at-large.

Community Organizing
In the community organizing program Georgia STAND-UP conducts door-to-door canvasses and voter registration drives in targeted neighborhoods in order to gain further knowledge about community issues and needs at the grassroots level.

About the Author
Melissa Conrad, MSW is the Policy & Project Coordinator for Georgia STAND-UP. In her role at Georgia STAND-UP, she is responsible for developing the curriculum for grassroots leadership education programs, organizing the Policy Institute for Civic Leadership, assisting in the fulfillment of the research goals of the agency, and analyzing policies pertaining to the key issues relating to economic justice and smart growth, such as economic development, affordable housing, and transportation. She has also served in the capacities of Researcher and Project Organizer, since she was hired as the first employee for the nonprofit community organization in March of 2005. Melissa is also a certified public participation professional through the International Association of Public Participation. In addition to her role at Georgia STAND-UP, she has served as an adjunct faculty member at Oglethorpe University. Melissa received her Masters in Social Work with a concentration in Community Empowerment and Program Development from the University of Georgia in 2005, and her Bachelors in Psychology from Oglethorpe University in 2002.
LISTEN UP!

Introduction

The relationship between decision-makers and the public is a complicated one. Major decisions regarding the health, safety, or future of communities, cities, and regions often lie in the hands of professionals, such as planners, elected officials, or other individuals representing governmental or quasi-governmental agencies or organizations, while the community seeks to impact those decisions through a variety of channels. Those channels can either create a feeling of empowerment around the decisions being made or a feeling of hopelessness, helplessness, or even animosity toward the decision and the decision makers themselves. As a result, important decisions that impact communities may result in dividing the communities further rather than bringing them closer together.

Examples of both types of Community Engagement can be seen in the city of Atlanta and in the broader region, but more often than not communities do not feel a sense of empowerment over how the important decisions are being made, creating either apathy among the community at large or animosity toward the body responsible for making that decision. These feelings then carry themselves over into new processes and decisions and impact the quality and quantity of engagement that is asked for and received.

In Atlanta, the BeltLine project came on the heels of many prior engagement processes, both effective and ineffective. As the Community Engagement framework for the BeltLine project is being developed and implemented, the process has met some major roadblocks in the community, some as a result of the feelings and emotions carried over from prior experience and others as a direct impact of the BeltLine Community Engagement process itself. These BeltLine related challenges and roadblocks and the reactions of the community as a result, serve as a picture into the broader challenges and issues with Community Engagement in the city and across the region.

In order to gain a better understanding of these challenges and issues, Georgia STAND-UP along with the BeltLine Tax Allocation District Advisory Committee (TADAC) held two sessions, a Community Engagement Listening Session and a Community Engagement Listening-Out session, where more than eighty leaders from around Atlanta and the region came together to discuss these issues and brainstorm solutions for designing Community Engagement processes that can address these existing issues and create more effective processes in the future. This report provides a summary of the results of those sessions, and provides guidelines for improving existing processes as well as developing new processes for providing the community with an opportunity to impact the decisions that affect their lives.
Community Engagement is the process by which the public provides input into the decisions and plans being made by governments and quasi-governmental organizations that impact their lives. One crucial element that distinguishes Community Engagement as a field of practice is that Community Engagement, unlike a public information campaign, is not about providing the public with information about decisions that have already been made, but instead is about gathering real input from the community about a decision that will impact their lives and using that input to shape those decisions. Real Community Engagement provides citizens with the information, tools, and resources that they need to take an active role in shaping the decisions that impact the communities that they have invested in through their tax dollars, time and energies.

Although research has shown that better decisions are made when the public is truly engaged in the process of decision making, often Community Engagement is not an integrated part of the decision making process and suffers from an extreme lack of resources and understaffing. Governments, and other entities working in communities, spend large amounts of resources to ensure that they have invested in the expertise of staff and consultants who are able to create the best and most accurate technical analysis of a decision or project, meanwhile Community Engagement processes are often developed in a silo, without an examination of research or best practices in development.

Many local governments and public institutions however are shifting their models of Community Engagement, by moving toward creating a set of standardized guidelines and processes to govern their efforts to conduct Community Engagement. In an effort to create a set of standards for those professionals and governments in the field of Community Engagement, one organization, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) along with a group of practicing professionals came together to develop the IAP2 Certification program. The IAP2 Certification program provides professionals in the field of public participation an opportunity to come together and be trained according to a set of core values and principles that govern the professional field internationally.

The IAP2 public participation core values are:

1. The Public should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public’s contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

These core values guide the development of successful and effective public participation processes around the world. In examining the results of the Community Engagement Listening and Listening-Out Sessions, this report will utilize these values as a guide for understanding both the issues and challenges relayed by session participants, as well as the solutions that were developed to address the issues.
LISTEN UP!
REBUILDING TRUST THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CORE VALUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The Public should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives.

This core value should be the foundation for all Community Engagement efforts that the city of Atlanta, its subsidiaries, and other regional governments undertake. The core of this value lies in the fact that the citizens of a region are the investors into the public realm and the owners of public spaces, and their input should be valued as such. Conducting Community Engagement is not about checking off a box on the to-do list of legislative requirements, but recognizing that the decisions dealing with public land, money, infrastructure, and the future of the city or region have real meaning and impact on lives of the citizens who have invested in the area through their tax dollars and other community investments. The input of the community into these decisions is both important to their lives and to the health and success of the project or decision.

Just as a corporate investor is concerned with the health of the corporation, the public has a natural concern about the decisions that impact their communities, neighborhoods and their families. That concern should be validated by a process by which the community can express their reactions and provide a space for the public to truly impact and/or create the decisions being made in reference to that project. While this value may seem to represent an obvious factor or principle in community input, often Community Engagement Processes are not designed in a way that reflects this value to the public. Projects and decisions should be shaped by community input not only because the community members’ lives that are impacted, but also because the results of such decisions are ultimately better when the community is able to influence the outcome.

LISTEN UP:
THE COMMUNITY VOICE

ISSUES
“People are ignored and shut out of the engagement process.”
“There is no engagement of the community”
“There is no Community Engagement organization in the city”

SOLUTIONS
“Listen to and hear the community voice.”
“Create Community Engagement Opportunities year round, not just at election time.”
“Create an office to coordinate Community Engagement activities”

COMMUNITY VIEWS-CASE STATEMENT- ONE

The Atlanta Housing Authority has scheduled the demolition of several public housing units around the city of Atlanta, however there was no opportunity provided by that entity for either the residents of those public housing units or the residents of the communities surrounding those units to provide any input in shaping either the decision to demolish or the rebuilding of the mixed income housing complexes to replace those units. This lack of Community Engagement has in turn resulted several large scale public demonstrations, forums, and meetings, and efforts to intervene by the Atlanta City Council on the behalf of the community. In this case, the lack of any community engagement has resulted in an on-going pervasive sense of distrust and anger at the decisions of the Atlanta Housing Authority and affiliated decision makers by many community residents.
Public participation includes the promise that the public’s contribution will influence the decision. Understanding the level of influence the community will have over any decision to be made is of the utmost importance in building a successful Community Engagement process. In any Community Engagement process, the trust that exists or does not exist between the community at large and the official decision maker or decision making body decides how effective that process will ultimately be and in turn determines the success of the overall decision. One of the first steps in building that trust is creating a promise to the public about how they will be able to influence a decision that is important to their lives, and then fulfilling that promise. By ensuring that all parties understand their roles and how their involvement in the process will be valued and reflected in the outcomes, an effective Community Engagement process prevents confusion and false expectations. Without such a process, the resulting confusion often creates the sense of distrust, misunderstandings, and adversarial roles that infect many decisions that are a part of the public realm.

Beginning Community Engagement with a clear promise of exactly how much influence the community will have and then ensuring the fulfillment of that promise throughout the process creates a sense of understanding among all the stakeholders involved and provides everyone with a standard for evaluating implementation and success. Too often, Community Engagement processes fall apart when the community and the decision makers have different standards for how community input will be reflected in a final decision; or even worse when a promise is given to the community and not fulfilled. While giving a promise at the beginning of a process and fulfilling that promise may not bridge the gap between the desire for greater influence by the community and the amount of influence the decision maker is allowing, it will limit the anger and frustration caused by misunderstanding and false expectations of how input will be used, potentially limiting the amount of community backlash to the final outcome.

When the board of the Grady Health System began to consider the option of shifting its operations from a publicly governed board of directors over to a non-profit board, the community interest and concern was overwhelming. While the board of the Hospital Authority held some public meetings where the community was allowed to voice their input and concerns, a promise was never to made to the public about how or if that input would be used to shape the final decision of the board. A series of protests and demonstrations followed many public meetings, where the community’s input was either not allowed or community members felt that their concerns were not heard. With no understanding of how their input would be taken into account in making the final decision, many community members’ believed that the decision was a result of only the concerns of decision makers and a few special interests, and was not in the best interest of the broader community.

LISTEN UP: THE COMMUNITY VOICE

ISSUES
“People don’t feel as if their input is important, and there is a sense that nothing will change even if they get involved.”
“There is a need to build trust in the community, and decision makers should do what they say they will do”
“There is a lack of trust and a feeling of disenfranchisement in the community because decisions have already been made or there is a feeling that decisions have already been made”

SOLUTIONS
“Be clear about how the community can impact decisions: people need to know that they hold the power and feel empowered.”
“Need to list and follow a clear framework how decisions are made, and the group should agree with rules”
“Be honest: Don’t make promises that can’t be kept.”
Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.

One major issue in Community Engagement processes is that the needs of all stakeholders are not addressed, and therefore the decisions that are made cannot be successfully implemented. In public decisions, many stakeholders have a key role to play and key input to provide that is vital to creating a successful outcome. Decision makers often understand the technical aspects and limitations to implementing potential decisions, including the limitation of resources or legal restraints. Community members and other stakeholders may have other key needs and/or interests that are just as important, such as concerns about safety surrounding a development or the need for a specific type of service to the community.

It is important that all of these needs and issues are transparent to all stakeholders so that they can be reflected in any decision to be made. Too often the issues and needs are expressed in silos, so that each stakeholder group only has an understanding of their specific point of view and are not responsible for creating a common solution together. By creating transparency and understanding around all of the issues and needs to be addressed or impacted by the decision, the responsibility for ensuring that the decision is implemented successfully is spread among all the stakeholders. This shared responsibility increases the likelihood that the decision will be sustainable even if the conditions surrounding the decision fluctuate.

The decision on where to build a trail in the Tanyard Creek area of Atlanta involved the needs and interests of many different stakeholders, including community residents and decision makers, such as Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., the PATH Foundation, and the City of Atlanta. The Community Engagement process examined several different trail alignment options that were designed by listening to the input of the community. However, when the time came to make a final decision, the trail alignment option that best addressed the community needs created a problem for the decision makers. Too many trees would have to be cut down and additional resources would be needed for that option. In making a choice on the final trail alignment, Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., the PATH Foundation, and the other decision making bodies ruled out the trail alignments that best addressed the community’s concerns in order to address their own. The community reacted strongly, in large part because the constraints of the decision maker had never been presented to the community while they were working to develop potential solutions to the problem of trail alignment. The community was outraged that their concerns were not taken into account, and as a result threatened litigation. The trail alignment decision is now being revisited, but the relationship between the community and Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. and its partners has been severely damaged.
CORE VALUES

#4 Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.

Often the largest issue with Community Engagement processes is that the “community” engaged in the process is actually a limited representation of those actually impacted by the decision to be made. Whether the reason for this lack of involvement can be traced to apathy, mistrust of the process, or sheer poor planning, Community Engagement processes that produce the most effective results mobilize the entire community in the decision making process, creating decisions that are sustainable and successful over long periods of time.

While this seems like a simple task, this portion of Community Engagement processes is often sorely overlooked and under-resourced. With a scarcity of publicity for events, limited outreach efforts, and poor timing of activities and meetings, many community members and stakeholders often do not engage at all in the decision making processes until the decision is undergoing final approval. Then too often decision makers are surprised at the level of misunderstanding and outrage that is expressed by members of the community who do not agree with the decisions that were developed during the process.

Successful Community Engagement processes involve large numbers of potential stakeholders in order to ensure that all voices are heard early in the decision making process. Utilizing methods for meeting the community and all stakeholders where they already are and providing them with easy ways to access information and provide input that does not conflict with their every day lives is vitally important to ensuring representation from a broad group of stakeholders, and in turn creating successful decisions long term.

LISTEN UP:
THE COMMUNITY VOICE

ISSUES
“Not enough people are involved on the community level.”
“There is poor to no communication in some areas and communities.”
“Major institutions are not engaging with the community, are not passing along information, and are not taking advantage of networks or sharing resources.”
“There is a lack of relationships with people in the community, so there is a lack of trust when information is shared or people need to be involved”

SOLUTIONS
“Create a method for door to door distribution of information”
“Utilize churches, social service and community centers, schools, libraries, to encourage involvement and provide opportunities for education”
“Grassroots organizations should be part of the outreach effort”
“Avoid conflicts with community events when scheduling major public meetings”
“Meetings should be held close to or within the neighborhood”

COMMUNITY VIEWS-CASE STATEMENT: FOUR

The BeltLine Community Engagement process has undertaken the task of conducting master planning for areas impacted by the BeltLine project in five geographic areas, which are organized into study groups. At a recent meeting of the BeltLine Southwest Study Group, a final draft of one of the master plan areas was being presented to the community for approval. This master plan made decisions about land use, park space, and other major planning decisions that would be eventually adopted into the city’s master land use plan, the Atlanta Strategic Action Plan. Due to poor outreach, confusion about meeting dates, and a need to build stronger relationships with community leaders, only seven community residents were present at this meeting, the results of which would have a major impact on the future of that community. Due to a lack of broad participation, the few residents who attended had major concerns about moving forward on plan approval, and a new meeting date with a new plan for outreach must be held.
Often even after stakeholders have learned about meetings or tried to participate in Community Engagement processes, the community at large is frustrated by or unsure of how to engage in the process designed for them. Understanding the community values, education levels, and culture is vitally important to designing a process that community members can engage in comfortable and effectively. Decision makers often design processes based on legislative requirements or existing practices, but do not take the time to understand how successful those methods have been in the past or how the community wants to provide input into the decision to be made.

Designing effective Community Engagement processes cannot be done in a vacuum. Those who have the best understanding of how a community can best provide input and engage in an on-going process are members of the targeted community itself. By engaging community members in the design of the process from the beginning, many potential roadblocks and pitfalls can be avoided, creating a more successful long-term relationship between the community and decision makers. Community Engagement processes are not “one size fits all,” and by engaging the community early in designing the process the specific needs and challenges of a community can be met head on.

In 2007, the City of Atlanta conducted a Community Engagement Process to update its citywide master land use plan, the Atlanta Strategic Action Plan. The Community Engagement process designed by city planners consisted of two meetings in various parts of the city broken up by geography, where community leaders were asked to come together to provide feedback on the issues their neighborhood was facing, two city-wide land use technical charrettes, and a separate process for review at the Neighborhood Planning Unit level. Throughout various communities’ participation in the process as it was designed, several issues came up, including conflicts with other meetings in the neighborhoods, the need to be updated on how input that had been previously given was being addressed, and a lack of knowledge and skills needed to receive the information presented and to engage in portions of the process. By not engaging residents, particularly those residents already involved in leadership of the Neighborhood Planning Units in designing the process for the ASAP review, the Community Engagement process as designed caused many community residents to be unable or unwilling to participate in the process, or to become frustrated because the process did not meet their needs.

LISTEN UP: THE COMMUNITY VOICE

ISSUES
“People are removed or feel removed from the process, and perception is reality.”
“There is a lack of acknowledgement that different communities work in different ways.”
“There is a lack of community training on how to participate and understand the process for engaging.”
“There is a lack of knowledge about the community.”
“Often the process or exercise is intimidating.”

SOLUTIONS
“Create more opportunities for engagement”
“Have interpreters at all meetings, as well as bi/tri-lingual supplies and materials”
“Make the engagement process longer, and talk about the issue until there is an understanding not until ‘time is up’.”
“Schedule some meetings after 5 p.m.”
“Make the expectations for participation clear”
“Be sure that the messenger reflects the audience”
“The process should include a series of events not just one meeting”

COMMUNITY VIEWS-CASE STATEMENT- FIVE

In 2007, the City of Atlanta conducted a Community Engagement Process to update its citywide master land use plan, the Atlanta Strategic Action Plan. The Community Engagement process designed by city planners consisted of two meetings in various parts of the city broken up by geography, where community leaders were asked to come together to provide feedback on the issues their neighborhood was facing, two city-wide land use technical charrettes, and a separate process for review at the Neighborhood Planning Unit level. Throughout various communities’ participation in the process as it was designed, several issues came up, including conflicts with
A common misconception about Community Engagement is that members of the community fully understand all aspects both of the project and also the process by which they are expected to provide their input. This fact, while often taken for granted, is vastly untrue and often exacerbates any false information about the project or decision to be made, because the community has limited understanding of the issue and limited access to information to increase their understanding. In order for communities to participate effectively, it is vitally important that they are well informed about the project or decision itself. Decision makers must be transparent and open with information about the project, and must provide that information in a way that community members can both understand and digest.

When a lack of information is provided about a project, a sense of distrust often begins to permeate the Community Engagement process and often false information begins to be accepted as fact. This misinformation and distrust not only causes lines of communication between decision makers and the community to break down, but also creates low quality input from the community that may not reflect certain realities of the decision to be made. Ensuring that community members are well informed about all aspects of the project or decision to be made allows them to provide input that is truly meaningful.

LISTEN UP: THE COMMUNITY VOICE

ISSUES
“There is a lack of information in ways that people can understand it.”
“There is a need to make people informed.”
“There is a lack of community understanding on how to participate and engage.”
“The information provided is too technical, and there is no training to understand it.”

SOLUTIONS
“Be transparent”
“Train the trainers, who are obligated to share knowledge and information”
“Develop creative education models”
“Allocate resources and funding for information and education.”
“Make the education simple, i.e. Create a coloring book”

COMMUNITY VIEWS-CASE STATEMENT: SIX

In early 2008, the City of Atlanta began a community engagement process to gather input from residents about a proposed fifteen percent drought surcharge on water and sewer bills. The initial opportunity for community input on the proposed surcharge was offered as an agenda item at a monthly meeting of each of the Neighborhood Planning Units. Residents were provided with only limited information on the proposed surcharge, but were not provided with information about the long term fiscal impacts of the surcharge or its relationship to the renewal of the city’s Municipal Option Sales Tax to fund renovations of the city’s water and sewer system, which was up for renewal by voters around the same time period. The confusion created by this lack of information reduced both the quality and quantity of input that residents were able give on the important budget issue.
The true test of the effectiveness of a Community Engagement process is the effect that process had on the ultimate outcome or decision to be achieved. The community must be able to both see and understand the impact of providing their input or any small successes of the process prior to that decision will go unnoticed and become meaningless in the weight of the ultimate failure. Community members must be shown that both their time and input were of value and importance in shaping the decision that was ultimately made for any process to be a true success.

The reflection back of the input received is one of the most important tools a decision maker has in gaining and keeping the trust of a community, but those involved in planning Community Engagement processes too often overlook this step. For example, the Georgia STAND-UP & TADAC Community Engagement Listening Session was followed by a Community Engagement Listening-Out Session, where the results of the original session were shared back to the participants, and they had the ability to both reflect on their prior input and also to provide clarity and prioritization to those results. This follow-up revealed to participants that their input was both valued and understood by those hosting the meeting. The reflection of the impact of community input not only creates a better decision for the specific project being dealt with at that time, but also creates a motivation for the community to engage in the next process that is created by the decision maker in question.

LISTEN UP: THE COMMUNITY VOICE

ISSUES
“The lack of a feedback mechanism or follow-up leads to a lack of follow-through.”

SOLUTIONS
“Provide feedback and make it understood that people are being heard”
“The decision makers need to ensure that communication from the community is received, disseminated, and discussed”
“Celebrate and publicize all results no matter how small”

COMMUNITY VIEWS-CASE STATEMENT: SEVEN

In 2007, MARTA held a community engagement process to examine the effectiveness of bus service for residents of neighborhoods in southeast and southwest Atlanta. As a result of broad community input, MARTA both created new and changed several existing bus routes to accommodate riders, particularly those who were looking to travel in an east-west pattern across town. After the community input phase was completed, MARTA held a large public meeting where officials reported back to the public how their input was utilized to create the new service plan, and presented the new plan in its entirety. By providing the community with this reflection back of their own input, MARTA was able to both gain the final community support and approval of the plan, while avoiding the confusion and anger that might have been caused by a sudden change in routes with no community notification.
RECOMMENDATIONS: Where to go from here

A major part of the Community Engagement Listening and Listening-Out Sessions process was to provide participants with a space to generate solutions to the issues and challenges they face. In order to truly address all the issues that are faced by both the public and those officials developing Community Engagement processes throughout the city, there must be a systematic change to how the city as a whole approaches Community Engagement. The most effective way to communicate the importance of gaining input from the community is to place Community Engagement as top priority for the city as a whole.

Primary Recommendation

Primary Recommendation: The City of Atlanta, Atlanta BeltLine, Inc, and all other entities who are conducting Community Engagement processes should develop a master Community Engagement plan for the city. This plan should create a set of standards for all Community Engagement efforts undertaken by the city and all of its subsidiaries, and should be developed with the assistance of a broad base of community stakeholders.

Secondary Recommendations:

The following recommendations should be represented both in the master Community Engagement plan, as well as be utilized in the implementation of ongoing Community Engagement processes as that plan is developed.

1. TRAINING
   Ensure that all individuals responsible for planning Community Engagement processes have either been through the International Association for Public Participation Certification program or an alternative program that provides certification for the Community Engagement professional. Or hire certified consultants to either assist with the development of the processes or to carry out the Community Engagement process in its entirety.

2. COMMUNICATION
   Ensure that all Community Engagement processes currently being implemented and planned clearly communicate to the public
   a. What decision is to be made
   b. How much influence they will have over the decision
   c. How their input will be given and reflected back to them
   d. A timeline for the Community Engagement process

3. PLANNING
   Ensure that Community Engagement process designs and techniques used allow the public to give meaningful input, and fulfill the promise to the public about how that input will be used.

Planning steps should include:

a. Involving members of the targeted community in designing the Community Engagement process, and the specific techniques that will be used to gain community input
b. Deciding what the final decision to be made is, and how community input will be used to create the final decision

c. Setting clear goals, objectives and timelines for the Community Engagement Process

d. Developing a set of techniques to be used that meet the goals and objectives of the process

4. COORDINATION
Establish an office or position whose responsibility it is to coordinate all of the Community Engagement activities that are currently happening in the city of Atlanta to share strategies or resources, assist with outreach and recruitment for meetings, and coordinate a master Community Engagement calendar in order to prevent the on-going occurrences of overlapping meetings within communities.

5. OUTREACH & RECRUITMENT
Develop an overarching plan for conducting outreach and recruitment for public processes that utilize both web-based and more traditional strategies for recruitment. Portions of this plan should include:

a. Utilizing grassroots community organizing tactics, including:

i. One-on-One Stakeholder Interviews and Meetings

ii. Neighborhood Canvassing and Door-to-Door surveying and information distribution

b. Recruiting existing community based organizations, faith-based organizations, and others to publicize community meetings, and supply them with the resources needed to do so.

c. Partner with agencies (i.e. MARTA) and businesses, both corporate and locally-owned in the community to create a consistent advertising method for community engagement opportunities.

d. Utilize local gathering places, i.e. parks, recreation centers, libraries, schools, etc. as a place to keep information and announcements available, and utilize kiosks and message boards to ensure that information is easily accessible.

e. Go to existing meetings in communities, i.e. PTA, Neighborhood Planning Units, Neighborhood Associations, Homeowners’ Associations, Public Safety Forums, etc and advertise upcoming opportunities for engagement.

f. Use non-traditional strategies, i.e. neighborhood yard signs, block parties, bike tours, and community fairs as a way to reach a new section of residents and community stakeholders.

While these recommendations do not encompass all the issues expressed in the Community Engagement Listening and Listening-Out Sessions, they do reflect the top priority solutions provided by the leaders who participated in the sessions.
Community engagement is a priority

Something is broken in the field of Community Engagement in Atlanta, and that something is trust. Community Engagement does not work when there is a pervasive distrust between the entities seeking community input on public decisions and the communities that are impacted by decisions being made. Atlanta, once again, is at the brink of fulfilling several projects that have the eyes of the country and world upon us. From the development of the BeltLine, the largest public infrastructure in the country, to being one of the fastest growing metropolitan regions in the country, now is the time for Atlanta to reveal to the world a city that is shaped by all of the citizens who have invested in the development of the city and call Atlanta home. Rebuilding the trust of the community through effective Community Engagement around the BeltLine and other key public decisions is a key step in creating a positive environment for the growth of a city and region that embraces an equity and justice for all of its residents.

Georgia STAND-UP will continue to provide a space for communities to add their voices to the conversation. We recognize that we grow together and become a better city, when we take the time to listen. The Georgia STAND-UP Alliance will seek opportunities to encourage greater community engagement through increased training, communication, planning, coordination, outreach and recruitment.

Let’s Listen, Think and Act together.
LISTEN UP!

Footnotes

1 The BeltLine is a 25 year publicly funded project created with the purpose of creating new public infrastructure and spurring development around the city of Atlanta. For more information about the project please visit www.beltline.org.

2 See the Community Voices section at the end of this report for a list of all participants.

3 See the Community Voices section at the end of this report for a detailed look at the framework and process for the Community Engagement Listening Session.

4 See the Community Voices section at the end of this report for detailed results of the session.


7 The “Listen Up: The Community Voice” sections of this report represent the direct community input received at the Community Engagement Listening Session & Listening Out Session Results held during the Georgia STAND-UP Alliance meetings on February 22 and March 14, 2008. Please see the Community Voices section at the end of this report for a full listing of these results.

8 These case studies are based on feedback from community members about their perceptions of both past and on-going community engagement processes happening in the city. Please note that these are qualitative examples only, and are being used to illustrate the community’s overall feedback.

9 The “Listen Up: The Community Voice” sections of this report represent the direct community input received at the Community Engagement Listening Session & Listening Out Session Results held during the Georgia STAND-UP Alliance meetings on February 22 and March 14, 2008. Please see the Community Voices section at the end of this report for a full listing of these results.

10 These case studies are based on feedback from community members about their perceptions of both past and on-going community engagement processes happening in the city. Please note that these are qualitative examples only, and are being used to illustrate the community’s overall feedback.

11 The “Listen Up: The Community Voice” sections of this report represent the direct community input received at the Community Engagement Listening Session & Listening Out Session Results held during the Georgia STAND-UP Alliance meetings on February 22 and March 14, 2008. Please see the Community Voices section at the end of this report for a full listing of these results.

12 These case studies are based on feedback from community members about their perceptions of both past and on-going community engagement processes happening in the city. Please note that these are qualitative examples only, and are being used to illustrate the community’s overall feedback.

13 Same.

14 These case studies are based on feedback from community members about their perceptions of both past and on-going community engagement processes happening in the city. Please note that these are qualitative examples only, and are being used to illustrate the community’s overall feedback.

15 The “Listen Up: The Community Voice” sections of this report represent the direct community input received at the Community Engagement Listening Session & Listening Out Session Results held during the Georgia STAND-UP Alliance meetings on February 22 and March 14, 2008. Please see the Community Voices section at the end of this report for a full listing of these results.

16 These case studies are based on feedback from community members about their perceptions of both past and on-going community engagement processes happening in the city. Please note that these are qualitative examples only, and are being used to illustrate the community’s overall feedback.

17 The “Listen Up: The Community Voice” sections of this report represent the direct community input received at the Community Engagement Listening Session & Listening Out Session Results held during the Georgia STAND-UP Alliance meetings on February 22 and March 14, 2008. Please see the Community Voices section at the end of this report for a full listing of these results.

18 These case studies are based on feedback from community members about their perceptions of both past and on-going community engagement processes happening in the city. Please note that these are qualitative examples only, and are being used to illustrate the community’s overall feedback.

19 Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority

20 One tool to assist with this portion of planning is a Community Engagement Spectrum developed by IAP2 that details five levels of engagement, the promise made to the public at that level, and provides examples of techniques that can be used to reach that level of engagement. The IAP2 Community Engagement Spectrum is available on-line at http://www.iap2.org.
Acknowledgements

**Report Author**
Melissa Conrad, MSW  
IAP2 Certified Public Participation Professional  
Policy & Project Coordinator  
Georgia STAND-UP

**Report Readers**
Gabriel Charvat  
Board Member  
Citizens for Progressive Transit  
Northeast BeltLine Study Group Coordinator

John Goldstein  
National Field Director  
Partnership for Working Families

Nathaniel Smith  
Emory University  
Office of University Community Partners

LaTosha Brown  
Truth Speaks

**Report Design & Layout**
Tahirah Mahan, Oracle Marketing

**Report Photography**
Regina Osime, Heka Media

**Report Printer**
Johnson's Printing Company

**Special Acknowledgement**
Georgia STAND-UP would like to specially acknowledge the BeltLine Tax Allocation District Advisory Committee (BeltLine TADAC) who were cosponsors of the Community Engagement Listening and Listening-Out Sessions.

**Listening Session Facilitators**
Saskia Benjamin  
Al Bartell  
LaShawn Hoffman  
Kate Little  
Cathy Muzzy  
Erica Pines  
Lorenzo Scott  
Ashley Simpson

**Special Thanks to our Funders**
Atlanta Women’s Foundation  
Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta  
Dobbins Family Foundation  
Fund for Southern Communities  
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 613  
Marguerite Casey Foundation  
New World Foundation  
Ford Foundation, via Phoenix Fund for Worker Justice  
Ottinger Foundation  
Public Welfare Foundation  
Veatch Program of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation

**Board of Directors**
Charlie Flemming - Chair  
Walter D. Andrews  
Rev. Dr. Richard Bright  
Cindia Cameron  
Cathy Howell  
Jerome Jackson  
Doug Polley  
Ola Reynolds  
Nathaniel Smith  
Yolanda Taylor  
Dorothy Townsend

**Staff**
Deborah Scott, Executive Director  
Melissa Conrad, Policy & Project Coordinator  
Cliff Albright, Organizing and Research Coordinator  
Maressa Pendermon, Funds Development Specialist  
Colette Simpson, Executive Assistant  
Ulanda Wilson, Policy & Project Assistant  
Zenobia Russell, Accountant  
Kevin A. Ross, Esq, Legal Counsel

**Interns**
Vannessa Zanders, Spelman College  
Jonathan Robinson, Georgia State University-Graduate  
Jessica James, Spelman College  
Caroline Jones, Oglethorpe University  
Kerri-Lynne Thomas, Spelman

Georgia STAND-UP would like to express our deep appreciation for all of our Alliance members and volunteers.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The City of Atlanta, Atlanta BeltLine, Inc, and all other entities who are conducting Community Engagement processes should develop a master Community Engagement plan for the city. This plan should create a set of standards for all Community Engagement efforts undertaken by the city and all of its subsidiaries, and should be developed with the assistance of a broad base of community stakeholders.

The following recommendations should be represented both in the master Community Engagement plan, as well as be utilized in the implementation of ongoing Community Engagement processes as that plan is developed.

TRAINING
Ensure that all individuals responsible for planning Community Engagement processes are certified in the field of Community Engagement.

COMMUNICATION
Ensure that all Community Engagement processes currently being implemented and planned clearly communicate to the public:

1. What decision is to be made
2. How much influence they will have over the decision
3. How their input will be given and reflected back to them
4. A timeline for the Community Engagement process

PLANNING
Ensure that the Community Engagement process designed and techniques used allow the public to give meaningful input, and fulfill the promise to the public about how that input will be used. This planning should involve members of the targeted community in designing the Community Engagement process.

COORDINATION
Establish an office or position whose responsibility it is to coordinate all of the Community Engagement activities that are currently happening in the city of Atlanta.

OUTREACH & RECRUITMENT
Develop an overarching plan for conducting outreach and recruitment for public processes that utilize both web-based and more traditional strategies for recruitment, including utilizing grassroots community organizing tactics.